University of Alberta

"And as for Sarai..."
First Wives and the Inheritance of Land
In the Promise Narratives of Genesis

by

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וַיִּקְבֹּר אַבְרָהָם אֶת־שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל־מְעָרַת שְׂדֵה הַמַּכְפֵּלָה
עַל־פְּנֵי מַמְרֵא הִוא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן
וַיָּקָם הַשָּׂדֶה וְהַמְּעָרָה אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ
לְאַבְרָהָם לַאֲחֻזַּת־קֶבֶר מֵאֵת בְּנֵי־חֵת

Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah
facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan.
The field and the cave that is in it passed from the Hittites
into Abraham's possession as burying place.
Genesis 23:19-20

To the matriarchs
then and now

Acknowledgements

Students are accustomed to being in debt; and in my case, the debt is extensive. I am indebted to the family of my childhood who gave me a rich inheritance of laughter, strength and faith. I am also deeply indebted to my own family, including my offspring Eric, Jeremy, Amanda and Justine, whose lives were put on hold so often so that Mama could work, and who dragged me (sometimes kicking and screaming) back into the real world when I slipped too far away. The deepest debt is the one I owe to my husband Gord, the greatest blessing of my life, whose gentleness and unfailing support were the mainstay of each day.

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To listen to a text as until you can hear its laughter, unveil its horrors, discover its secrets and share its whispered memories -- that is the gift that you sought to share with me, and for it I am grateful.

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I. Introduction

In the first extensive death and burial narrative in the Hebrew bible, the first wife of the first patriarch dies (23:1-20).[1] In order to bury his wife Sarah, Abraham must procure a burial place. After lengthy negotiations with the residents of the land, the cave of Machpelah is purchased, and Sarah is laid to rest. This family tomb will eventually hold three generations of patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and their corresponding "first wives"—Sarah, Rebekah and Leah. Sarah's burial in a cave purchased on her behalf, combined with the subsequent interment of the succeeding generations of matriarchs, can be explained in terms of the symbolic fulfilment of the promise of land made to the matriarchs as well as to the patriarchs.

Genesis 12-50 tells a story of promise given by the Lord to the people who will become known as Israel. Labelled "the Patriarchal Narratives," these stories have been described in terms of a three-part promise of land, offspring and blessing. This promise is generally understood as being made *to* the patriarchs and *for* the patriarchs. Yet the same texts are filled with the stories of matriarchs who, like their male counterparts, act and react, plot and deceive, wrestle and triumph. They are born, marry, give birth and die within the shadow of the promise.

These women have alternately been vilified and valorized in scholarship throughout their narrative history. They have been held up as role models by some and had their character questioned by others. They have alternately been dismissed as pawns in a patriarchal power struggle, and pointed to as proto-feminist champions in the battle for equality.

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[1] Because the texts cited are primarily from Genesis, I will omit the prefix "Gen" from the references for texts taken from that book. All biblical references are in the New American Standard Version unless otherwise specified.

Their role in and relationship to the promises given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is undergoing necessary reassessment. In the past, the women of Genesis have been seen as part of the promise narratives primarily in terms of offspring and secondarily, through their offspring, in terms of blessing. At best, these matriarchs have been seen as active participants in the bearing of offspring and blessing. At worst, they have been portrayed as passive wombs in service of patriarchal power structures. The third element of the promise—the inheritance of land--has singularly been understood as the male prerogative being given, as it was, in a time when men possessed and passed on land. However, by understanding the burial of the ancestors in the land as an act of symbolic fulfilment of the promise, one can reassess the relationship of the matriarchs to the promise of land.

This study examines the characterization of the first wives of the patriarchs as those through whom the primary child of promise and blessing is born, and for whom the cave at Machpelah is accessible. Abundant literary links associate these matriarchs with the main story line of the promise narratives. Their burial in the family tomb confirms their primary status as "bearers" (themselves) of the promise, not merely as those who "bear" the child of promise. By reassessing their role in the promise narratives in terms of this final aspect of the promise, it is possible to see the matriarchs as full participants in the so-called "Patriarchal Promises."

This study also seeks to determine why the cave door is sealed to those "other" matriarchs: the ones who bear children outside the main promise line or who bear children within the main story line but subsequent to the child who receives the primary blessing. Far from being rejected or ejected from the narrative, these women are given other promises and are made part of other stories. Their exclusion from the cave is

counterbalanced, throughout the texts, with an inclusivity that continually reintegrates their stories into the larger web of texts.

II. Methodological Issues: The Problem of Patriarchy

The stories of the patriarchs, beginning with the call of Abraham and carrying forward to the death of Joseph, have dominated the pages of Genesis. These stories have been described, for many years, as the "Patriarchal Narratives." To see a patriarchal bias at work in the study of these texts, one need look no further than to the title of Claus Westermann's 1980 book entitled, *The Promises to the Fathers: Studies on the Patriarchal Narratives.*[2] Clearly the role of the men in these stories has taken a prominent place in our understanding of the texts.

While Cheryl Exum believes that stories of women can and should be drawn out of the texts, she argues that these stories are and will always remain *patriarchal* narratives. She claims that "the stories of Genesis are stories of the father, patriarchal stories." They are in contrast to the "incomplete and fragmented" stories of women of Genesis. "The 'promise to the fathers' is the traditional—and, indeed, appropriate—label for what has been identified as one of the major themes in the Pentateuch."[3]

Taking a slightly different approach, Savina Teubal sees these texts as deliberately misrepresented by the scholarship employing the term. She writes:

> The stories from Genesis are known to scholars as the *Patriarchal Narratives.* The intent of this designation is to draw the reader's attention exclusively to the activities of the male. It conceals the importance of women and the plurality of divinity and gender, leaving the archetypal figure of the father predominant: the "*patriarchal*" prototype.[4]

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[2] Claus Westermann, The Promises to the Fathers: Studies on the Patriarchal Narratives, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).
[3] J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women* (Valley forge: Trinity, 1993), 94-6.
[4] Savina J. Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 20.

Increasingly, however, the promises are no longer being seen as inherently or even primarily "patriarchal." As feminist scholarship advances, challenges have been made to this label. Mary Donovan Turner suggests that, considering the active role of the matriarchs in these stories, "...we may be encouraged to lay aside our exclusive designation of the *patriarchal* narratives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and more appropriately refer to them as the stories of our *ancestors.*"[5]

When one approaches texts that have been typically categorized as "patriarchal," especially if one is seeking to avoid some of the common pitfalls of a patriarchal interpretative bias, it is important to be clear about the meaning of the term. This has proven to be no small task. The following influential definition was advanced by Gerda Lerner in 1986:

> [Patriarchy is] the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does *not* imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources.[6]

This definition has been adopted by scholars such as Pamela J. Milne, Danna Fewell and David Gunn.[7] However, Carol Meyers describes the use of this definition as a "methodological flaw." She accuses those who employ this definition of "misusing the

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[5] Mary Donovan Turner, "Rebekah: Ancestor of Faith," *LTQ* 20 (1985), 42-50, 42.
[6] Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 239.
[7] See Pamela J. Milne, "No Promised Land: Rejecting the Authority of the Bible," *Feminist Approaches to the Bible*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1995), 47-73, especially 47-8. See also Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15.

term patriarchy as a synonym for male dominance or for a system in which male traits are valued over female ones."[8] Meyers cautions against conclusions based on universals (such as the concept that male-dominance is similar from one cultural context and setting to another), on an exaggerated dichotomy between the public and private spheres of life (a relatively modern development), and on the assumption that the male "realm" is superior. She writes, "they assume that male prerogatives and responsibilities are innately better than female ones." This tendency also leads people to read back with post-modern eyes a world very different from our own. In doing so, Meyers warns, we "superimpose contemporary ideas on societies different from ours in fundamental ways."[9] It is important, then, to consider patriarchy first in terms of the ancient Israelite society.

In the World of Genesis

In the world of ancient Israel, land was owned and managed by men. Inheritance was passed down from generation to generation, primarily through the male line. For sons, inheritance took place at the time of their father's death. Being the first-born son was meant to carry with it a special privilege. When the estate was divided, according to the laws of primogeniture, the largest portion was to be given to the eldest son. This right could be traded or lost (as with Esau and the pot of stew, 25:27-34); it could be transferred because of misconduct (as in the case of Reuben, 49:3-4), but not because of favouritism (Deut 21:15-17).[10] When sons married, they retained their line of inheritance in their father's house.

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[8] Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 26.
[9] Meyers, 29-33.
[10] For a full discussion of these rights, see Raymond Westbrook, "Biblical Law," *An Introduction to the History and Sources of Jewish Law,* ed. N. S. Hecht, et. al. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 1-17, quote from 15.

For daughters, inheritance took place at the time of her marriage. Through a bride price paid by the bride's father to her prospective husband, a daughter could inherit what was to be hers from her father's household.[11] She then joined the household of her husband. Although her inheritance may have come under the control of her husband during his lifetime, it would revert back to her in the event of a divorce. If a woman became a widow, her inheritance from her father's house would serve to protect her economic interests and insure against poverty.[12]

The principles guiding the laws of inheritance in the ancient world can be, and often are, perceived as being weighted heavily in favour of the male. Paula McNutt, in an attempt to reconstruct the society of ancient Israel, describes the plight of women as a bleak one. "The picture [in Genesis] is of a society in which a woman has no power if she is not protected by a family, and even less if she is unable to participate in ensuring family continuity by providing her husband with children, especially male children to carry on the family name."[13] While not describing women in such desperate terms, Grace Emmerson likewise suggests that male children were of primary concern to women for very practical reasons. Sons added economic stability to a woman's life. While sons were an economic asset, Emmerson argues that women were not singularly valued for their ability to produce male offspring: "It is a misrepresentation of marriage in ancient Israel to speak as if a wife was valued only for the sons she bore."[14]

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[11] Philip Drey, "The Role of Hagar in Genesis 16," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 40:2 (2002), 179-95, quote from 187.
[12] Grace I. Emmerson, "Women in Ancient Israel," *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives,"* ed. R. E. Clements (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 371-394, quote from 383.
[13] Paula McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Knox, 1999), 94.
[14] Emmerson, 385.

Although inheritance, and particularly the inheritance of land, clearly served a necessary economic function in the world of ancient Israel, Davies suggests that the concept of land also carried a deep ideological resonance. It is "imbued with a profound theological significance" as the visible sign of the relationship between YHWH and the people.[15] The land was chosen for them by the Lord, and given to the people as a gift. Although various tribes could be assigned specific territory within the land, as Davies points out, the land belonged to all the people as a divine grant. Rather than an individual inheritance, the overwhelming concern was the inheritance of the people as a whole.[16]

Also highlighting the preference for "corporate land management" granted by divine provision, Joy Osgood questions the assumption that women were not entitled to inherit land. She cites three examples of biblical land ownership by women (2 Kgs 8:1-7; Ruth 4:3; Num 27:1-11).[17] The most compelling example concerns the inheritance of land by the daughters of Zelophehad (Num 26-27). The successful claim of daughters to inherit their father's land has earned them the title of "earliest feminists of Israel" from some scholars.[18] However, even in this case, the issue is not one of rights or power, but of the proper ideological understanding of land. Examining the issue of inheritance, Derby notes that "in the minds of the Israelites, the distribution of the Land was divinely ordained." Because of this, the daughters were allowed to inherit the *land on the condition that they marry only from within their tribe*. "The intrusion of an outsider into

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[15] E. W. Davies, "Land: Its Rights and Privileges," *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives,* ed. R. E. Clements (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 349-69, quote from 349.
[16] E. W. Davies, 351.
[17] S. Joy Osgood, "Women and the Inheritance of Land in Early Israel," *Women in the Biblical Tradition,* ed. George J. Brooke (Lewiston: Mellen, 1992), 29-52. See 29, 34--5.
[18] See, for example, Josiah Derby, "The Daughters of Zelophehad Revisited," *JBQ* 25:3 (1997), 169-71, quote from 169. Zvi Ron agrees. Zvi Ron, "The Daughters of Zelophehad," *JBQ* 26 (1998), 260-2.

this relationship could not be tolerated. The acquisition of a piece of property in one tribe by a man from another through his marriage to an heiress would, in the sentiment of her tribe, diminish its sacred relationship with its God-given territory."[19]

Steinberg's study on kinship relationships draws similar conclusions. Texts which are concerned with inheritance, i.e. proper lineage as well as property, tend to support endogamous marriage. For those outside the direct lineage, marriages are simple affairs characterized by straightforward inheritance. The direct line of descent, however, is fraught with difficulties.[20]

Because the world of ancient Israel was a patriarchal society,[21] the *social context* of the Hebrew bible has in some cases been blamed for androcentric biases perceived in the texts. According to Milne, the desire to control women's sexuality and fertility is "one of the central underlying goals of patriarchal society." Convinced of their own superiority, men in a patriarchal society quite naturally produce texts which reflect the same bias. "It is not remarkable or unexpected...that a document produced in that context expresses the view that men are superior to women and that women are the property of men."[22]

Economic considerations such as land and lineage, however, do not offer a full picture of the status of women in the ancient world. In a 1978 foundational study of pre-

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[19] Derby, 171.
[20] Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 11-2, 43.
[21] Some scholars such as Savina Teubal and Nancy Jay have attempted to argue that Israelite society was not truly patriarchal, but rather a society embroiled in a struggle between patrilineal and matrilineal primacy. Savina J. Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess: The First Matriarch of Genesis* (Chicago: Swallow, 1984), 3. See also Nancy Jay's study on sacrifice and patrilineal descent, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992). While this interpretation does attend to some of the tensions between gender presentation in the texts, this position is not widely accepted. For a discussion of the problems with this perspective, see Meyers, 30.
[22] Milne, 48.

industrial societies, Martin Whyte concluded that to have lower status in one aspect of life (for example in terms of political power) did not necessarily imply a lower status in other aspects of life.[23] This conclusion ties in with the observations of Ze'ev Falk in a study on Hebrew law. Falk suggests that while women had a lower status in law, custom actually operated in their favour. Because law applied only to a limited area of life concerned with ownership and property, it is wrong to understand or define the role of women by legal concepts only.[24] Furthermore, while there is a tendency to describe all patriarchal societies in a homogeneous way, Naomi Steinberg suggests that there was much more variation in gender relations than one might expect.[25]

Meyers takes a similar position, suggesting that the texts may contain statements which only *appear* to establish an imbalance in favour of men. She warns that within a culture such as that of ancient Israel, one can (but should not automatically) assume that all power structures in which "gender asymmetry" exists are oppressive. To do justice to the cultural setting of the text, we must be aware of the distance between the ancient world and our own and recognize our inability to fully understand it. This is not to suggest that horror or inequality in biblical texts should be excused on the grounds that it was produced in a patriarchal society:

> ...we do not intend to be apologetic but rather to sensitize the reader of scripture to the antiquity of the texts, the otherness of the society that produced them, and the lack of evidence that the Eves of ancient Israel felt oppressed, degraded, or unfairly treated in the face of cultural

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[23] Whyte concluded, "Knowing how much access to political power women have in a given society will not allow us to predict with any confidence how free of restrictions their sexual lives will be, or how much of the work of the society women will perform." Martin King Whyte, *The Status of Women in Preindustrial Societies* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), 169.
[24] Ze'ev W. Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times* (Provo: Bringham Young UP) 109.
[25] Naomi Steinberg, "Gender Roles in the Rebekah Cycle." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 39:3 (1984), 175-88, quote from 175.

asymmetry. Gender differences that appear hierarchical may not have functioned or been perceived as hierarchical within Israelite society.[26]

While we must recognize our inability to rely on our own presuppositions about the world of the text, Exum also cautions us against simply taking the text at its word when describing the experience of women. Because of the patriarchal moorings of the text, she argues, all we can access is the representation of ancient women by the men who created those representations. The desperate desire of the women for offspring, for example, may be nothing more than "a male fantasy" based on the desire of men "to imagine women behaving in this manner—a fantasy projected onto the ancestral figures."[27]

The close reader of biblical texts does not need to attempt a reconstruction of the ancient society which existed behind the text, but rather to be drawn into the world that is created by the text itself. Part of that task is to become familiar with the conventions and expectations established by the text and its intertexts. Just as Robert Alter pointed out the ways in which literary conventions help us to become better readers,[28] so understanding the world of the text allows us to become more aware of the non-fulfilment of expectations. For example, one of the expectations we might have of a world which marks descent through patrilineal lines would be genealogical lists primarily focused on men. Transgressions of that expectation, then, may be highly significant. The more one attends to the world of the text, complete with all of its boundaries, the

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[26] Meyers, 33-4.
[27] Exum, *Fragmented*, 121.
[28] See, for example, Robert Alter, "How Convention Helps us Read," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983), 115-30.

more one can appreciate the importance of speeches and actions which transgress those boundaries.

In the Interpretation of Texts

Aside from the patriarchal world(s) of the texts, blame for the androcentric bias of biblical narratives has been placed by some scholars squarely on the shoulders of the interpreters of the texts. Looking over the views of the women of Genesis from the past, one finds ample reason to do so. From early fathers of the Christian church through the reformers of the later Middle Ages and until the recent past, a long history of patriarchal interpretation has influenced the reading of texts. Tertullian was openly misogynistic:

> And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? [...] *You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man.[29]

Other interpreters have been full of patriarchal benevolence. Luther described Rebekah as "adorned [with sincerity and obedience] in such a manner that she is suitable and useful for the saintly man and worthy of becoming a mother so glorious that her womb will produce that divine fruit."[30] One might think that such patriarchal biases in interpretation are things of the distant past, yet they linger. Speiser describes how the burial of Sarah shows that "the Founding *Fathers*, at least, must not be buried on alien soil."[31] In his commentary, Victor Hamilton describes Jacob on his deathbed as recalling

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[29] Tertullian, "On the Apparel of Women," *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995) 14.
[30] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 4., trans. George V. Schick (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 270-1.
[31] E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1982),172. Emphasis mine.

"the names of patriarchs and *a matriarch*" despite the fact that Jacob has listed matriarchs from all three generations (Sarah, Rebekah and Leah).[32] Mieke Bal summarizes the problem this way:

> [T]here are and there have been throughout the history of exegesis, a myriad of different interpretations, scholarly, theological, and philosophical. I contend that the majority of these different readings nevertheless have some form or other of misogyny in common, even if they try hard, sometimes explicitly, to avoid it."[33]

Interpretations that have built up over the years may serve to distort our reading of the texts whether we are aware of it or not, forcing us to carry what Bal calls the "unconscious burden of previous interpretations."[34]

By relieving the biblical texts of this burden of interpretation, some scholars claim that we can uncover a "correct" meaning which was subsequently distorted. This was the approach of Phyllis Trible in her ground-breaking work, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*.[35] Trible claimed that scholarship could "depatriarchalize" the text: "to reread (not rewrite) the Bible without the blinders of Israelite men or of Paul, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and a host of others...to translate Biblical faith without sexism."[36] For Trible, who located the problem of patriarchy in the *interpretation* of texts, the issue became to *read right* rather than to *re-write*.

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[32] Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 688.
[33] Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories.* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), 2.
[34] Mieke Bal, *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 12.
[35] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).
[36] PhyllisTrible, "Depatriarchalising in Biblical interpretation," *JAAR* 41 (1973) 30-48.

According to Danna Fewell, Trible accomplished the task. She credited Trible with being able to "[blow] away the dust of patriarchy, so to speak, allowing the works to shine as images of feminist hope and affirmation." By doing so, Trible "exposes the way in which interpreters and translators of the Bible have, in many cases, been more sexist that the biblical writers themselves."[37] Trible's ability to point out the problem of interpretation paved the way for new portrayals of women in biblical texts. In a survey of biblical women, Janice Nunnally-Cox made the claim that the texts of Genesis offer a dynamic and rich portrayal of the matriarchs. "Far from conforming to a traditional servitude, these women grace the pages of Genesis with their laughter, their sorrows, their strength, and their power."[38]

Over the years, Trible's approach has not been abandoned. Ann Marmesh points to the active role of the matriarchs in securing the covenant promises, as well as their "autonomous acts of self-care and self-pleasuring." She suggests that women actively maintained the covenant; therefore, understanding the texts in terms of "male-mastery and male bonding" must be set aside in light of the frequent testimony to the contrary.[39] In a recent study entitled "Genesis Matriarchs Engage Feminism," Jo Ann Davidson questions the assumption that the patriarchy of the text is responsible for the mistreatment of women. Instead, she argues that the text indicates a much more positive view of women than has been recognized by patriarchal scholarship. "I do wish to question feminist insistence that OT patriarchy is the prime cause of [offences against

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[37] Danna Fewell, "Feminist Reading of the Hebrew Bible: Affirmation, Resistance and Transformation," *JSOT*39 (1987), 77-87, quote on 79.
[38] Janice Nunnally-Cox, *Fore-Mothers: Women of the Bible* (New York: Seabury, 1981), 20.
[39] Ann Marmesh, "Anti-covenant," *Anti-covenant*, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 43-60, quote from 43-5.

women]...textual indicators within Genesis...seem to depict matriarchal existence far more positively than feminism typically acknowledges. [40]

In order to set aside patriarchal interpretations, close attention must be paid to the texts. Gunn and Fewell called for a re-evaluation of the way we look at texts, particularly "the more conventional attitudes concerning centrality and marginality." While recognizing that Genesis 12-50 assumes a patriarchal society, they suggest that many of the stories are about women: "women who have their own desires, their own conflicts, their own plots if you will."[41]

Embedded in the Texts

Unlike those who believe that the texts can be redeemed from patriarchal interpretations, there are those who consider biblical texts to be so inherently flawed, so infused with patriarchal concepts and ideas, that they can never be redeemed. Stories of women, when they appear, do not balance the inequality since women, when present, serve only to further the patriarchal plot line. Female characters are at best in the shadows and at worst exploited. This idea that biblical texts are inherent misogynistic is fairly widespread. Carol Meyers points out that the idea of women being inferior in the texts of the bible is often shared by those who support it as well as those who are outraged by it.[42]

According to Philip Davies, Genesis is a clearly gendered world and one in which the deity is looking out for the interests of males. "Throughout, the male deity behaves according to his gender, dealing preferably with his mates and disposing of the females

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[40] Jo Ann Davidson, "Genesis Matriarchs Engage Feminism," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 40:2 (2002),169-178, quote on 169-70.
[41] David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford UP), 76.
[42] Meyers, 24.

as he sees fit, particularly with regard to their procreative role." Davies claims that this gender-based favouritism ties in with Genesis' focus on separation. "In the world created in Genesis the separation of male and female is like the separation of light and darkness, day and night, summer and winter, engraved in the order of things."[43]

Athalya Brenner sees women as pitted against the patriarchal order in texts, and the women always come up the losers. The pairs of mothers in Genesis (including Sarah and Hagar, and Rachel and Leah) are consistently portrayed as working against the very important patriarchal social order. "They are described as noisy, quarrelsome, disruptive, irresponsible. They have been chosen to serve as vessels for carrying the divine promise, but their conduct proves them hardly worthy of their destiny...[They are] socially maladjusted...they do not understand the implications of their circumstances and fail to act wisely."[44] Exum agrees that shows of strength against the patriarchal order are destined to fail: "[When women] are subversive, it only serves to legitimize the control of them by men.[45]

The idea that the texts are male-oriented, even when women appear to be prominent, has been taken up by a number of scholars. Exum remarks that the inclusion of women does not reveal an interest in them in their own right. Instead, they serve male purposes: "The matriarchs step forward in the service of an androcentric agenda, and once they have served their purpose, they disappear until such time, if any, they might again prove useful."[46]

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[43] Philip Davies, ed. "Genesis and the Gendered World," *The World of Genesis: Person, Places, Perspectives* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1998), 7-15, quoted from p. 8.
[44] Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns Within the 'Birth of the Hero' Paradigm," *VT*36:3 (1986), 257-73, quote from 265.
[45] Exum, *Fragmented*, 139.
[46] Exum, *Fragmented*, 97.

The prominent role of women, taking place as it often does within traditional sex roles may only serve to reinscribe patriarchy. According to Esther Fuchs, this is especially true of motherhood. Patriarchy valorizes women as mothers because their role as wife and mother serves patriarchy's ends. Fuchs goes even further, to claim that patriarchy is built into the structure of the narratives. Through studies of various type-scenes, she concludes that the very form of biblical poetics is used to promote patriarchy.[47]

Milne likewise denies that biblical texts can ever be useful or positive texts for women. Even if successful in uprooting the canon of male-centered texts from its patriarchal moorings, it "still leaves women reading the same male texts...as long as we accord authoritative status to the biblical tradition, we accord authoritative status to patriarchy and sexist ideology.[48] Letty M. Russell made the following charge in 1985: "...it has become abundantly clear that the scriptures need liberation, not only from existing interpretations but also from the patriarchal bias of the texts themselves."[49] According to some scholars, this has not been possible.

Different Readings – Close Readings

Other scholars, however, employ methods of reading texts *differently* in order to discover the voices and perspectives that are hidden or overlooked in the text. Reading against the grain and looking for "countertraditions" within biblical texts has been the

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[47] Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield:: Sheffield, 2000), 47. See also "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship,* ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico: Scholar's, 1985), 117-36. Also "Structure, Ideology and Politics in the Biblical Betrothal Type-Scene," *Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1993), 273-81. Also "Who is Hiding the Truth: Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism," *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship,* ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico: Scholar's, 1985), 137-44.

[48] Milne, 69.

[49] Letty M. Russell, ed. "Liberating the Word," *Feminist Interpretations of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 11-8, quote from 11.

approach of a number of scholars like Mieke Bal, Ilana Pardes and Cheryl Exum.[50] Exum describes within Genesis "countercurrents of affirmation" which demonstrate "women's courage, strength, faith, ingenuity, talents, dignity, and worth." These stories serve to "undermine patriarchal assumptions and temper patriarchal biases, often challenging the very patriarchal structures that dominate the narrative landscape."[51]

McKinlay suggests that reading must always be determined to some extent by "choices and controls." As one can imagine, some of these are brought to bear on the text by the reader, and others are written into the text by its own boundaries and limitations.[52] When approaching the texts, one can choose to listen to the dominant voice of the narrative or one can tune in, instead, to the passive voice. When considering the portrayal of characters within the text, one can choose to assess their respective roles either *quantitatively* or *qualitatively*. From a quantitative perspective, it is clear that Genesis devotes more lines to the stories of men. Yet there are other key determinants –qualitative measures--that also indicate importance. These include literary techniques such as repetition, the particular location of the story relative to the

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[50] See, for example, Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988). Also Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) and her more recent book, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible*, (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000).Tensions within texts have also been the focus of a study comparing canonical criticism and feminist theory. Nancy Bowen applies two key concepts of canonical criticism, i.e. pluralism and monotheizing, to patriarchal texts. According to Bowen, these two perspectives hold one another in tension, necessarily making room for a variety of views. Because any particular text cannot be exclusive and normative, the way is paved for the corpus of texts to be self-critical: "Scripture has built in a self-correcting apparatus that makes it impossible to absolutize any one cultural idiom or any one particular experience or expression of God's presence and activity." 241.

[51] J. Cheryl Exum, "Mother in Israel: A Familiar Story Reconsidered," *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 73-85, quoted from 74.

[52] J. McKinlay, "Reading with Choices and Controls: Genesis 12," *Feminist Theology* 17 (1998), 75-87. She acknowledges that "In my reading, I have already made choices." For all readers "there are choices, that will exercise control over the interpretation." The interests of the readers intersect "interests already there within the text." 79, 81.

larger text, and the variations on expectations that create meaning without being written into the text.

Meaning results from the intersection of text and reader.[53] As a reader of the *text*, then, one can seek a balance between what is being said and what is being silenced. As the *reader* of a text, as well, one must also seek a balance between understanding and ambiguity. Fewell and Gunn point out that instinctively every reading aims for coherence, for "an encompassing, comprehensive, and coherent account of their text." This instinct must be balanced by the ability to be suspicious readers, attentive to the sounds of discord within the text.[54]

The technique of "close reading" offers the best chance for sensitivity to the texts by combining the best of all interpretative techniques. It requires immersion into the world created by the text, and attention paid to the subtle markers and expectations within that world. It requires time spent chasing narrative threads that weave patterns out of words. It demands a willingness to double back on one's path when the tensions within the text call for it. It necessitates shuffling off patriarchal interpretations and straining to hear the voices excluded by them. It means sifting through prominent patriarchal passages and choosing to read, instead, the story of the promise to the matriarchs.

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[53] See the discussion of Van Alphen's two "moments of meaning" in Bal, *Anti-Covenant,* 14.
[54] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, 16.

III. The Promise to the Matriarchs: An Introduction

The promise to the ancestors in Genesis consisted of three parts: land, offspring and blessing. For the first three generations the promise appeared to be off to a slow start. Sarah gave birth to one son, Isaac. Her daughter-in-law Rebekah gave birth to two sons, only one of whom was to carry on in the direct lineage of the promise. Even in the fourth generation, when the promise expanded to include the twelve sons of Leah, Bilhah, Rachel and Zilpah, the fulfilment of the promise of descendants "as numerous as the stars" seemed a long way off.

Appearing even more remote, by the closing verses of Genesis, was the promise of land. The first three generations of the promise were dead, and the children of the fourth generation were living outside the land. There was one striking exception to the "landlessness" of the matriarchs. Upon Sarah's death, her husband purchased at a great cost the cave of Machpelah at Hebron facing Mamre as a place of burial for the matriarch. In death, Sarah would be joined by Rebekah and Leah, the other "first wives" of the promise narratives. These matriarchs would be joined by their husbands, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs of the promise narratives.

In each generation, the Lord chose the matriarch destined to be the mother of the promise—the one who would, in death, find her rest in the land promised to her and to her descendants forever.

IV. The First Wife of the First Generation: Sarah

Sarah is the first matriarch of the promise narratives. She travels with her husband Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans to settle first in Haran (11:31). During subsequent travels with her husband, Sarah is twice passed off as his sister: first in Egypt (12:10-20) and then in Gerar (20:1-18). Initially barren, she provides her husband Abraham with her שִׁפְחָה Hagar in order to obtain offspring through her (16:1-2), but the plan only pits the two women against one another (16:5). Elohim, via Abraham, changes Sarai's name to Sarah and announces that Sarah will bear a son (17:15-19). This promise is repeated in Sarah's hearing by three men/YHWH at the oaks of Mamre (18:9-15). Sarah gives birth to Isaac after she is well past her childbearing years (21:1-2). She is responsible for the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness of Beer-sheba (21:8-14, especially noting verse 12). She dies at Kiriath-arba at the age of 127 years (23:1-2) and is buried by Abraham in the cave of Machpelah, east of Mamre, which he purchased as a burial place for her (23:3-20).

Literary Links to the Promise

Throughout the accounts of Sarah, there are threads that weave the matriarch's story into the web of the larger narrative. The first two of these connecting threads concern the act of naming or renaming, and motif of barrenness giving way to fertility. Both are introduced to the storyline with the introduction of Sarah. We first hear of the first generation matriarch in the תּוֹלְדֹת (genealogical lists) of Terah. The text reports two key pieces of information about Abraham's wife: her name is Sarai, and Sarai is barren (11:27-30). Ironically, everything we know of this woman, apart from her status as Abraham's wife, will change in the course of the unfolding narrative. From a literary standpoint, she will be completely rewritten: Sarai the barren will become Sarah the

mother of laughter.[55] Before Sarai's barrenness gives way to fertility, however, a significant event takes place: her name, along with Abram's, is changed.

> *[And God said to him] (5) "No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations…" (15) God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. (16) I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."*
>
> (17:5, 15-16)

A name in the Hebrew bible can be a reflection of a particular situation or condition. It can describe a distinct characteristic or the role of the one being named. At times the significance of a name is explicit in the text, while other times it is merely alluded to through subtle plays on sounds or complex linkages.[56] The meaning of Abraham's name is offered in the text: the "exalted father" is to be "the ancestor of a multitude of nations" (17:5).[57] The meaning of the names Sarai and Sarah are understood as variants on the word meaning "princess," Sarai being an archaic form. This may be

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[55] Laughter (צְחֹק) is given to Sarah in the birth of her son Isaac (יִצְחָק) (21:6).

[56] See, for example, the naming of Peleg (10:25) based, as it was, on the condition of the world: "the name of the one was פֶּלֶג for in those days the earth was divided נִפְלְגָה. Eve's name reflects her role as "mother of all living" (3:20). In the case of Esau, the text tries to explain his name by saying that he was "red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau" (25:25). As pointed out by Speiser,195, and others, the etymology of the name does not precisely work. His description as ruddy אַדְמוֹנִי is linked to his alternate name of Edom אֱדוֹם given in 25:30, whereas his hairiness שָׂעִר is more accurately linked to the land of Edom, Seir. Meir Sternberg argues that a name can often veil a character and, in some cases, "the revelation (of a name) concerns the giver rather than the bearer, who has no voice in the matter." An example of this is found in the naming speeches of Leah. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), 330-1

[57] While in the context of the ancient near east, the name Abraham may carry the theophonic meaning "the (divine) father is exalted," in the present literary context it refers to Abraham's supreme patriarchal status.

especially appropriate as it is followed by the promise that "kings of peoples will come from her" (17:16).[58] For both Abraham and Sarah, then, a familial and relational role of exalted father and princess/mother of kings is highlighted.

A further link to the promise is also suggested for the name Sarah. It may be argued, as Elizabeth Wyner Mark has demonstrated, that there are echoes of the name Sarah in the name of Israel. Israel (יִשְׂרָאֵל) is renamed because he strove (שָׂרִיתָ) with God (32:29). The verb may be translated as "have power with," even as the noun שַׂר may be translated as a leader or ruler. The name Sarah (שָׂרָה), the feminine form of the noun *sar* (שַׂר), thus completes the narrative link. Mark further points to the prophet Hosea's account of the wrestling, in which this echo becomes more audible: "[Jacob] שָׂרָה with God" (Hosea 12:4).[59] This association would further reiterate Sarah's role as a mother of the promise.

Aside from the meaning of the name, however, the very act of naming in the biblical texts is a significant event. Naming often makes a claim to ownership or acknowledges generative responsibility.[60] In Genesis, naming first takes place in the creation accounts. Elohim names (וַיִּקְרָא) the objects of creation (1:5, 8, 10), *'adam*

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[58] See Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 126. Also Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 202. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996), 73. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 476. The Hebrew word *sar* (prince/ruler) is, according to Sarna, often paired with the Hebrew word *melekh* (king), as occurs in this text. Sarna, 126.

[59] Elizabeth Wyner Mark, "The Engendered Shema: Sarah-Echoes in the Name of Israel," *Judaism* 49:3 (2000), 269-276, quote from 270.

[60] E.g. Speiser, 127.

names (וַיִּקְרָא־לוֹ) the animals (2:19, 20), the female creature is named (יִקָּרֵא) woman (2:23) whom Adam later names (וַיִּקְרָא) Eve (3:20).

Birth, another creative act, is likewise the occasion of naming. Children are named by mothers, as in the case of the offspring of Leah and Rachel (29:32-30:24). Children are also named by fathers: Enosh was named by his father Seth (4:26), Noah was named by Lamech (5:28-29), and so on. Other children are named by God, as in the case of both Ishmael (16:11) and Isaac (17:19). While naming offspring is often assumed to represent paternal authority of a father, and therefore a prerogative occasionally usurped by a mother, Ilana Pardes argues that the opposite is true. "Naming is not only Adam's prerogative...nor is it necessarily a paternal medium. Eve is no exception; more often than not it is the *mother* (or surrogate mother) who names the child."[61] She equates naming with maternal power so that Adam, in naming Eve (3:20), is playing "the (m)other's part."[62]

The association between birth and creation is highlighted in the birth of the first child after creation. Eve names her son Cain (קַיִן) (4:1), exclaiming that she has "gotten a man" (קָנִיתִי אִישׁ) with the help of the Lord!" Commentators have sought to make this

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[61] Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 41, emphasis hers. Pardes counts seventeen cases of name-giving by a male, versus twenty-seven cases in which the name-giver is female. In some of her examples, however, it is disputable who bestowed the name. For example, in the case of Seth, Eve is said to have named him (4:25) but later Adam is also said to have named him (5:3). In other cases, as Pardes notes, a name is given by a character but attributed to or associated with another. This is the case when God chooses Isaac's name (17:19), Abraham bestows it on him (21:3), and Sarah appears to interpret the name (21:6-7). Pardes does not, in her statistics, take into account any naming other than the bestowing of personal names, thereby excluding the "naming" of creation that takes place in Genesis. She does not, either, take into account the renaming that takes place in the cases of Abram/Abraham, Sarai/Sarah and Jacob/Israel. In fact, Pardes credits God with only the choosing of a name, as distinct from the bestowing of it. Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 163.

[62] Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 49.

claim acceptable by translating it as "gotten" or "produced" or "acquired."[63] However, Alter argues that Eve is, in fact claiming creative power: "Eve...imagines herself as a kind of partner of God in man-making."[64] Pardes concurs, adding that Eve "challenges *both* the divine restrictions on human creativity and the exclusion of the feminine from the representation of creation."[65]

This birth is appropriately the "creation" of a "man." Noting that this is the only occasion in which an infant is referred to as a man (אִישׁ), Sarna pairs this verse with Adam's naming of woman אִשָּׁה (2:23). "Eve now says, in effect: 'I, woman *(ish(sh)ah)*, was produced from man *('ish)*; now I, woman, have in turn produced a man.'"[66] Eve credits YHWH with being her partner in this creative act. It is not necessary, although it is possible, to understand her speech as a literal claim to creative powers, or to a sexual partnership between the Lord and herself. It is enough that the echoes of the language of creation carry over into regeneration, so that birth is a new creation. Like the women after her in Genesis, Eve views the Lord as a source of creative or regenerative powers.

The naming of children is often understood as an act of ownership. It is noted that both Leah and Rachel name the children of their maids, who were "born on the

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[63] Von Rad, 103, translates it "gotten." Hamilton, 220-221, rejects the creative connotations in favour of "acquired." Spires, 29-30, translates it as "added." He explains the term "a man" as referencing an individual person, as opposed to the "undifferentiated and generic" term '*adam*, thus Eve merely welcomes a new individual.

[64] Alter, *Genesis*, 16.

[65] Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 47.

[66] Sarna, 32. Sarna goes on to note that here the name of the Lord (YHWH) is spoken for the first time, and by a woman.

[67] See Spieser,127, and Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36* trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 261.

[68] Alter, *Genesis*, 73

[69] Joseph Fleishman, "On the Significance of a Name Change and Circumcision in Genesis." *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 28 (2001), 19-32. Fleishman, 21, 23.

knees" of the matriarchs (e.g. 30:3-6). While the children are still recognized as the children of their birth mother (see 33:2 and 35:23-36), they are "credited" to either Leah or Rachel in the race for progeny (30:6). It is interesting to note that Sarah, who did not bestow Ishmael's name on him, did not ever claim him as her son. On the other hand, Abraham *did* give Ishmael the name the Lord had chosen, and Ishmael *is* referred to as Abraham's son (16:15, 21:11).

This "claiming through naming" is often understood in terms of property and possessions, since conflict over ownership rights can be associated with naming. After struggling with his brother and killing him, Cain is sent away. He establishes a place for himself, however, in a city that he builds and names after his son Enoch (4:16-17). Abraham names the wells he claims as his own (21:25-31), but when they are claimed by others, Isaac must reopen them and return to them their rightful names (26:18). In fact, he leaves behind a trail of names that attest to the on-going conflicts over the ownership of wells (26:19-33). Even in these cases, however, whether adopting a child, erecting a city or opening and releasing life-giving waters, it can be argued that naming is connected to life and fertility.

The changing of names is likewise significant. Scholars have drawn parallels between the change in status when a king ascends a throne, and the corresponding change of his name.[67] From that perspective, changing the names of Abram and Sarai (the first name changes in Genesis) coincides with a change in status. Alter suggests that as the king ascends a throne under his new name, so Abraham assumes his new name when he "undertakes the full burden of the covenant."[68] Joseph Fleishman, in an examination of name changes and circumcision in Genesis, suggests that since naming is associated with ties to culture and religion, the renaming of a character through subtle changes to his name creates a final break with his previous "cultural-religious milieu"

without completely erasing his past.[69] With few exceptions, the name change of Abraham and Sarah is perceived as a symbol of or a movement toward the fulfilment of the promise.[70]

However, there are further meanings that can be applied to the act of renaming. If naming is associated with creation and birth, then renaming can be equated with a recreation or a rebirth. Thomas Brodie describes the new names of Abraham and Sarah as "signs of new fertility."[71] Sarah is apparently in need of such regeneration. She has been barren throughout the text – a problem for women of the day. The problem was, in part, a practical one. The provision of children for the continuation of the family line was important. In some cases in the ancient world, it appears to have been a legal obligation for a barren woman to provide her husband with a concubine in order to continue the family line.[72] Although not an expectation of law in the world of Genesis, Hamilton suggests that the need to perpetuate the family line would have likewise rendered the practice "obligatory."[73]

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[70] Jeansonne says, "God first changes her name as a preview to her function." Sharon Pace Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 21. An exception to this concept of forward motion toward the fulfilment of the promise, Cohen sees the change as a response to the abuse of Hagar and therefore reflecting Abraham and Sarah's "changed status as a direct result of this dreadful incident." Jeffrey M. Cohen, "Displacement in the Matriarchal Home," *JBQ* 30:2 (2002), 90-6; 95.

[71] Thomas L Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 231.

[72] See Speiser,120. A variety of ancient documents attest to the ability or the requirement of such a practise. These include the laws of Lipit-Ishtar (early 19th cent. BCE) which allow a harlot to bear children for the husband of a barren woman, an Old Assyrian marriage contract (19th cent. BCE) which requires a wife to provide a concubine if a child has not been born to her within two years of the marriage, and the Code of Hammurabi, in which a priestess is expected to provide a surrogate mother because she is restricted from giving birth herself. See Sarna, 119.

[73] Hamilton, 445.

[74] See, for example, Exum, "Mother," 76.

The lack of children was more than an economic concern, however. It also had implications on the status of a woman.[74] Sarai desires to be "built up" (אִבָּנֶה) through the offspring of Hagar (16:2). Although this can simply mean that she will obtain a child, there is an associated sense of "raising up" which is to accompany the birth of a child to her. This expectation becomes clear when it is thwarted. Instead of being built up, Sarah finds herself made diminished or "made light" (וַתֵּקַל) in the eyes of Hagar (16:4-5). The production of offspring, particularly boys, in a patriarchal society increased status; whereas barrenness decreased status.

Commentators describe barrenness as a "cause of shame" for which there was "no greater sorrow."[75] The shame or loss of status experienced by a barren women either implies some degree of fault on her part, or, at the very least, a lack of favour. In the text, Sarai blames God for her barrenness, acknowledging to Abraham that "the Lord has prevented me from bearing children" (16:2). It is clear in the texts of Genesis is that YHWH is seen as responsible for the opening and closing of wombs. When Rachel accuses Jacob of not giving her sons, he responds that he is not in the place of God to either grant or withhold children (30:2). When Sarah conceives, Abraham is nowhere in narrative sight.

> *(1) The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived... (6) Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me."* (21:1,6)

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[75] Janzen, 43 and von Rad, 191, respectively. J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). Regarding loss of status, see Exum, "Mother," 76.
[76] Rulon-Miller, 74, suggests that God was directly responsible. She offers the following: "I suggest that the 'all-too-human' Yahweh...chose Sarah for his matriarch and impregnated her himself to begin the multiplication of his seed and the guarantee of his 'inheritance.'" Nina Rulon-Miller, "Hagar: A Woman with an Attitude," *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives,* ed. Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1998), 60-89.

Despite her doubting laughter, God has made it possible for Sarah to have pleasure (18:12) by bringing her laughter. "Laughter" carries with it the suggestion of sexual pleasure. It is clear that in the text, God is responsible for the conception of Isaac, regardless of participation on the part of the patriarch.[76] The absence of the father from the narrative of conception or birth may serve to highlight the remarkable birth of the hero.[77]

Throughout Genesis, God exercises the generative prerogative. From the waters of chaos to the rivers of Eden, from the floodwaters to the maternal waters, the creative power of the Lord continues to open and to close, to create, to destroy and to recreate. The promise of creation in the womb of Sarah is connected with the rebirth of Sarai as Sarah. Thomas Brodie describes the new names of Abram and Sarai as "signs of new fertility."[78] Citing a similarity between the language of the blessing given here and the creative command to be fruitful and multiply, von Rad connects the *blessing* given to Sarah in this text with her ensuing fertility. As in creation, "God's blessing here too effects the miracle of physical fertility, cf. ch. 1.22, 28."[79] For Abraham, according to the

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[77] See Mieke Bal's discussion *Lethal Love*, 41.
[78] Brodie, 231.
[79] Von Rad, 202.
[80] Sarna (1989: 125). Westermann (1985:260) describes the name change as "the promise of increase." See also Hamilton (1990:463), von Rad (1972:199-200). Thomas Brodie (232, 240) attributes the meaning of an expanded promise to both Abraham and Sarah's new name.
[81] Fuchs, "Sexual Politics," 48, describes how this pattern denies "a woman's 'natural' ability to give birth" except through extraordinary and external agency, thus offering "a patriarchal interpretation of motherhood."
[82] See Brenner (1986) and Alter (Biblical Narrative, 47-62), (1983), Williams, 1980. Fuchs, 1987, (2000:44-65).
[83] Brenner, 258. For examples in other cultures, see the birth stories of Sargon the Great or King Oedipus.

text, the expansion of his name coincides with his expanding role as father of a multitude of nations. Sarna calls this a "literalistic twist" to the promise: even as he is made great, so "Abram will be enlarged by the addition of a syllable."[80]

The opening and closing of the womb elevates birth to a miraculous or "extra-natural" phenomenon.[81] This is true, in particular, of the mothers in the line of the promise. While conception carries no more than a biological resonance in the stories of Hagar, Ketura, Bilhah and Zilpah, for example, it is divinely ordained or restrained in the mothers of the promise. The motif of the barren woman who goes on to give birth, miraculously, to a heroic character has been identified by scholars as a "type-scene" which existed not only in the biblical world but also in a variety of ancient cultures.[82] The "birth of the hero" myth, as described by scholars such as Athalya Brenner, is known in biblical texts such those relating to Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and Samson. It is also known in a variety of other cultures. It is so widespread, in fact that Brenner refers to it as "universal."[83] In every culture in which the story is told, the more difficult the circumstances of the birth of the child, the more miraculous the birth becomes. In biblical texts, the miraculous birth identifies the child as a gift from the Lord, and offspring of the deity whose generative powers are seen as bringing life to the barren womb.[84]

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[84] That the Lord claims the life of the child he has miraculously granted is in evidence. Isaac is taken out of the care of his mother and brought to Mt. Moriah. There his biological father symbolically sacrifices him. Isaac's life is spared by YHWH, who takes over the role of Abraham as father. After his death Abraham is never again placed in proximity to his son in the text. Even in the very important matter of the marriage arrangements of Isaac, Abraham sends an envoy in his place. This representative is to trust in the Lord to provide a wife, even as the Lord provided a ram on the mountain.

[85] Westermann, *12-36*, 267.

[86] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender,* 47-8. See also Davidson, 171, who notes that Sarah is as important to the divine covenant as Abraham. Nunnally-Cox, 8-9, describes her as his equal.

[87] Janzen, 50-51.

[88] Mark, "Shema," 273.

[89] Fuchs, "Sexual Politics," 50, 52. Also Fuchs, "Literary Characterization," 121.

The motif of barrenness-to-birth serves a further purpose in Sarah's story: it makes even more explicit the inclusion of Sarah in the promise. Had Abraham and Sarah conceived without the entire drama of barrenness and fertility taking place, it could be argued more easily that any womb would do. In fact, the woman whom the Lord chooses, Abraham's legitimate first wife, Sarah, is the one and only one to whom the promise is also given. Simply put, "Sarah is brought into the promise."[85] This was not earlier assumed. In fact, Abraham is incredulous at the idea that his offspring will come through Sarah:

> *(17) Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (18) And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" (17:17-18)*

Whereas Abraham had previously tried to accomplish the matter of offspring through adoption or by another woman, YHWH specifically designates Sarah as the mother of the promised offspring, and Abraham laughs at the idea. Fewell and Gunn describe the patriarch's reaction as less than exemplary:

> [He] "does not believe...does not 'firmly assent' to God's plan...does not 'take it seriously' or 'adjust to it.' God cannot be serious, thinks Abraham. Sarah is neither capable nor necessary...God, however, is resolute. The promise includes Sarah. It is not enough that the child is Abraham's. The child of promise must be Sarah's... ."[86]

Viewing Sarah in this way, as "integral to the divine purpose with Abraham" has led some scholars to see this action as a direct attack on patriarchal practices. Janzen claims that "with one stroke God subverts two of the bases of patriarchal identity and power: (1) primogeniture is displaced, and (2) inheritance is tied to the mother as well

as the father."[87] Mark agrees: "...remarkably, being a son of Abraham conveys no special status. Of the seven sons of Abraham who were not sons of Sarah, only Ishmael, whose birth was arranged by Sarah, receives recognition from God... ."[88]

Other scholars, such as Fuchs, disagree. She points out that the son is actually given to Abraham (21:2-5). Sarah is little more than the means. Even the fertility of Sarah serves Abraham's purpose: it is "required by Yhwh's commitment to Abraham" and occurs "because of her husband's magnanimity and despite her pettiness."[89] Even the change of name, according to Fuchs, is mediated through Abraham and only occurs after the reinstatement of the covenant to Abraham, thus reducing its significance and relegating the change to a subordinate position.[90]

The text, however, is clear: it does not withhold a blessing from Sarah, nor does it allow the promise to continue without her. As Teubal notes, the Lord returns to *Sarah*, as he promised, because the promise was made to *her*.[91] Furthermore, Sarah is specifically blessed. The Lord says: "I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her" (17:16). It is tempting to emphasize the paternity of Abraham in the text (i.e. to read "I will give *you* a son by her"), but it is as important to read it against the patriarchal

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[90] Fuchs, "Literary Characterization," 120.
[91] Teubal, *Hagar,* 104. Exum disagrees: "Although the matriarchs are not actually absent from the narrative, they regularly drop out of view at critical points in the family's history. When the threefold promise of land, descendants, and Israel as a sign or mediator of blessing is addressed to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, there are no matriarchs in sight." Exum, *Fragmented*, 102.
[92] This has been commented on by a number of scholars, including Davidson, 170, and Jeansonne, 29.

grain, recalling the impact of this element of the story on its original audience. From a social, economic and legal standpoint, Abraham had a choice: he could adopt or designate a legal heir. He could produce an heir through a surrogate mother, concubine, handmaiden or slave. From the standpoint of the one giving the promise, however, there was only one choice: the child was to be Sarah's offspring. The claim that the Lord makes upon the life of Sarah by renaming her, and upon the womb of Sarah by engendering life in it, combined with the extension of the promise also to her suggests that we focus on the maternity of the text. The Lord also said, "I will give you a son by *her*." Literally and figuratively, Sarah is written into the promise.

The Death and Burial of Sarah

The literary incorporation of Sarah into the texts of promise continues in the notice of her death and burial. Her death is recorded, which is significant. But also recorded is her age at the time of death: a unique occurrence for a woman in biblical texts.[92] Sarna comments that this inclusion "testifies to Sarah's great importance as the first matriarch."[93] The style of her death notice reads like that of a patriarch:

> וַיִּהְיוּ חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשֶׁבַע שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה
>
> *Sarah lived one hundred twenty-seven years; this was the length of Sarah life.* (23:1)

Alter calls the repetition of שָׁנָה ("the years...the years...the years") an "extravagance" of language.[94] This repetition follows the same pattern in the death notices of Abraham (25:7) and Ishmael (25:17) and Isaac (35:28).[95] A "long life full of years" was a positive

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[93] Sarna, 157.

[94] Alter, *Genesis*, 108.

[95] (25:7) וְאֵלֶּה יְמֵי שְׁנֵי־חַיֵּי אַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר־חָי מְאַת שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה וְחָמֵשׁ שָׁנִים
(25:17) וְאֵלֶּה שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי יִשְׁמָעֵאל מְאַת שָׁנָה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וְשֶׁבַע שָׁנִים

summation of the life of a biblical character. This is made most evident by the exception to the rule. When asked about the years of his life, Jacob charges Pharoah not to consider the years of his life to be like those of his ancestors:

> *"The years of my earthly sojourn are one hundred thirty; few and hard have been the years of my life. They do not compare with the years of the life of my ancestors during their long sojourn."* (47:9)

The assumption is that these years (130) would normally suggest a long and good life, but he claims this is not the case for him. As well as being roughly equivalent to the long and good life of (most of) the patriarchs, Sarah's age is itself significant. Scholars suggest that 127 years represents the fullness of a life span, as recorded in Genesis 6:3, with the addition of the number seven indicating fullness.[96] The mother of the first generation of the promise thus lives a life which recalls completion and creation. Thomas Brodie points out that the "overflowing fullness" (fullness added to fullness) which summarized the matriarch's life contrasts dramatically with the barrenness which characterized the first part of her life.[97]

Brodie also suggests that the same fullness is indicated geographically in the location of her death, i.e. the "City of Four," Kiriath-arba, which evokes images of "four corners of the earth; four rivers in Eden, Genesis 2; four directions around the tabernacle, Num. 2:3, 10, 18, 25."[98] Westermann describes it as a place "where four ways meet," whereas Hamilton and Sarna describe it as a settlement of four families.[99]

(35:28) וַיִּהְיוּ יְמֵי יִצְחָק מְאַת שָׁנָה וּשְׁמֹנִים שָׁנָה

[96] C. J. Labuschagne, "The Spans of the Patriarchs" *OTS* 25 (1989)121-127; 124. In contrast, there is also an ancient tradition that Sarah did not live a long life, but died upon hearing of Abraham's journey to Mt. Moriah to sacrifice Isaac.

[97] Brodie, 274-275.

[98] Brodie, 275.

[99] Westermann (371, 373); Hamilton (126) and Sarna (157).

Alternatively, the name could be translated as city of Arba (a personal name), as is done in Joshua 14:15; 15:13; 21:11. In that text, Arba is the father of Anak, who is the father of Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmai. These are the giants who stand in the way of the children of Israel as they near the end of their wilderness wandering. Ilana Pardes, pointing to Freud's famous blurring of the borders between *heimlich* (familiar, belonging to home) and the *unheimlich* (unfamiliar or uncanny), sketches these giants who inhabit the Promised Land as both familiar and strange, representing both the "indigenous Canaanite population but also a distorted image of the patriarchs." It is as though the "fathers" who will be buried in this tomb--Abraham, Isaac and Israel himself—will rise from this burial place and tower over the children of Israel as they come back to claim the land.[100]

In order to bury Sarah in this place, Abraham must secure permission from the residents. His legal status is that of a גֵּר־וְתוֹשָׁב (a stranger or alien resident), with no rights to the land.[101] He appears at the gates of the city, where the Hittites are gathered, and begins to negotiate with Ephron, the owner of the cave. At this point the voice of the narrator fades into the background, and a dialogue takes over.

The negotiations over Machpelah (meaning "double") function on two levels, forming what Sternberg ironically terms a dialogue of "double talk."[102] Abraham requests that Ephron give to him an inheritance as a burial place. In response, the Hittites offer to let Abraham use the choicest of their graves. The debate continues, with Abraham insisting that they *give* him – for the full price of the land – a *holding as a burial place*.

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[100] Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000), 113-4.
[101] Westermann, 373 describes the term this way: "a semi-citizen without land or ownership which he can acquire only with the agreement of the community."
[102] In the words of Sternberg, (Double Cave, 39), "clues lurk...(in the) poetics of repetition with variation."

The key to the dialogue is found in the subtle shifts in terminology within the highly repetitive speeches.[103] Two key elements of the dialogue – Abraham's desire to own the land and its identification as an inheritance as a burial place – become the subject of the understated debate. What Abraham requests is a holding as a burial place (לַאֲחֻזַּת־קָבֶר). What the Hittites offer in return is interment in the choicest of their graves (קִבְרֵינוּ). While the word קבר (burial place) is fairly straightforward, the term אחזה is more complex.[104] When used as a verb, the term implies grasping with a firm hold. As a noun, the term is used in Genesis to refer to a holding of land. When applied to land given by the Lord, however, there is an implication that this possession is a "permanent possession" or an inheritance. In the promise narratives themselves, the everlasting nature of the possession is made explicit (לַאֲחֻזַּת עוֹלָם) to Abraham (17:8) in the same version of the promise which changes Sarai's name and specifically includes her in the

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[103] Sternberg, (31).

[104] The verb אחז means to grasp or hold tight: the ram is held (נֶאֱחַז) in the thicket on Mt. Moriah (22:13); Jacob is born holding (אֹחֶזֶת) his brother Esau's heel (25:26). Hamor, father of Shechem, entreats the sons of Jacob to join their families and live together with an invitation to "possess!" (וְהֵאָחֲזוּ) the land (34:10). While the sons of Jacob decline Shechems' invitation (to put it rather mildly), Israel later does hold land (וַיֵּאָחֲזוּ) in Egypt and become fruitful and numerous (47:27) which is then perceived as a threat. As a verb, the term implies seizing with a firm hold.

Outside of Genesis, the term carries the same implication of a firm hold. The Levite "grabs hold of" the unnamed concubine before dismembering her (Judges 20:6), Uzzah "grabs hold of" the ark to steady it (2 Sam 6:6; 1 Chr 13:9), a woman is "gripped by" the pangs of labour (Jer 13:21; 49:24), the Lord "holds fast" the psalmist with his right hand (Ps 139:10), and so on.

Used as a noun, the term in Genesis describes a holding of land. It is applied to the possessions of the chiefs of Esau (36:43), and to the land in Egypt given distributed by Joseph to his father and brothers at the invitation of Pharaoh (47:11, 27).

This is attested to outside of Genesis. In Leviticus, the term is used primarily to refer to permanent property that could be tenured but to which one would return in the jubilee year (Lev 25:1-34; 27). The term is also used to refer to the inheritance of land by the daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27:4, 7) which establishes the rights of daughters to inherit in the absence of sons. In Ezekiel 44:28, there is a specific correlation between possession and inheritance. In describing the role of the Levites in the new temple and among the tribes, the Lord says, *"And it shall be with regard to an inheritance for them, that I am their inheritance; and you shall give them no possession in Israel—I am their possession."*

unfolding events. Although the exact term אֲחֻזַּת עוֹלָם is not used in direct speech attributed to the Lord in Jacob's dream of the ladder to heaven (28:10-22), Jacob uses it when recounting to his son the promise he received at Luz/Bethel during this vision (48:4). The holding, seized or grasped firmly, is meant as a permanent possession passed down from generation to generation for descendants of the promise. The usage of אֲחֻזַּת־קֶבֶר ("a permanent possession/inheritance" combined with "burial place") is particular to the Cave of Machpelah (23:4, 9, 20; 49:30; 50:13).

This title to this permanent possession or inheritance must be absolutely held, which is made evident to the reader willing to listen closely to the nuances of the text. Abraham asks initially that the people hear his request to be given a possession as a burial place among the Hittites (23:4). The verb used by Abraham is נתן ("to give"). The verb can be interpreted in one of two ways. "To give" can mean to freely bestow, but it can also be the language of commerce. In the case of property, it can mean "to give over to" at whatever cost is demanded. The Hittites, in turn, ask Abraham to listen to them. They offer to let Abraham bury his dead in the choicest of their graves (23:6), but there is no mention of giving. The offer is for *use*, without any implication of ownership. Abraham asks again that they hear, this time to his specific choice of burial places – the cave belonging to Ephron son of Zohar. He reiterates his desire for it to be "given" to him, this time adding, "for the full price" (23:8-9). His request is not to *use* a *grave*, but rather to *possess* a *possession*. Ephron then plays on the double meaning of the verb נתן in an expansive speech in which the giving increases. He asks Abraham to hear instead his generous offer: *to give* Abraham the field, *to give* him the cave that is in it, and *to give* these things so that Abraham can bury his dead (23:11). Again, no

mention is made by Ephron of the cave as a possession which would be owned by Abraham, and so Abraham must continue to negotiate. He pleads again to be heard, since the Hittites are not really hearing (or deliberately "mis- hearing") the request he is making. Temporarily setting aside the issue of the burial place as an inheritance or permanent possession, Abraham focuses instead on the field. He offers to *give* Ephron the price of the field, and asks that Ephron *take* the payment from him (23:13). Abraham thereby erases any ambiguity about the "giving" – it is now clearly a commercial transaction. On the surface, Ephron's response (23:15) appears to negate the crass commercialism of the exchange – after all, what is a piece of land worth 400 shekels between such men as they? Ephron's price, however, belies the appearance of collegial generosity. Abraham is being asked to hear, and to make no mistake about, the price that he will be required to pay for this "gift."[105] With this speech, the dialogue breaks off and the narrator reappears. Abraham stops speaking and "hears" Ephron (23:16), at which point the exchange takes place.

The "giving" of this piece of land is made particularly ironic by the price paid by Abraham. Some scholars claim that it is impossible to accurately assess the value of land in the biblical world; and therefore we cannot know if the price paid was high.[106] Most scholars, however, describe the amount as greatly inflated.[107] The price of four

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[105] Most scholars agree that the dialogue is one of deliberate negotiation, or what von Rad describes as "a delightful miniature of adroit Oriental conversation!" 247. For an opposing view, see John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1992) 180. Sailhamer suggests that Abraham talks the Hittites into accepting payment, which is against their wishes. This interpretation takes the dialogue at face value and overlooks the detailed posturing that takes place between Abraham and the Hittites.

[106] See Sarna, 20, and Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991); 24, n. 1.

[107] For example, Sternberg calls it "exorbitant." Meir Sternberg, "Double Cave, Double Talk: The Indirections of Biblical Dialogue," "*Not in Heaven:" Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative,* ed. Jason P. Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 31. Speiser calls it "excessive," 171; Hamilton calls it "no bargain," 135; Westermann calls it "very high," 375; and Alter calls it "a king's ransom," 111.

hundred shekels for a piece of property consisting of a field and a cave can be best understood in relation to other purchases of land in the Hebrew Bible. Jacob purchases a field on which he builds his tent (Gen 33:19) for 100 קְשִׂיטָה ("pieces of money"). Jeremiah purchases a field for 17 shekels (Jer 32:7-12). The future site of the temple, the threshing floor of Araunah, is purchased by King David for 50 shekels of silver according to the account in 2 Samuel (2 Sam 24:24), although the Chronicler increases the price to 600 shekels of gold (1 Chr 21:25).[108] The entire area on which Samaria is to be built is purchased for 6000 shekels (1 Ki 16:24). By most of these accounts, the price paid by Abraham was clearly too high.

Several of these texts within the web of intertexts are particularly notable. Jacob's field is later used as a burial ground for Joseph and becomes the inheritance of his sons (Jos 24:32), even as this field contains the burial cave of the first three generations and symbolizes their inheritance. The purchase of the field by Jeremiah occurs on the eve of exile and is, according to the explicit description of the text, meant to symbolize a future hope for the return of the people to the land (Jer 32:7, 14-15, 43-44). Many scholars have suggested that a similar message is embedded in this text as well: the purchase is a "deposit" on the future hope of ownership.[109] This is especially

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[108] It is interesting to note the connections between the Chronicler's account and the text of Genesis. While both Samuel and Chronicles have David insisting on purchasing the land, as did Abraham, only the Chronicler uses the same phrase: בְּכֶסֶף מָלֵא ("for the full price"). The Chronicler's increased price is consistent with what scholars suggest about the ideological framework of the Chronicler, with the emphasis on Jerusalem and the temple. The Chronicler casts the act of building in a very positive light, and particularly the building of the temple. The emphasis on David as the one who prepares the way for the temple to be built during the elevated Solomonic reign (as compared to the Samuel/Kings narratives) explains the high price that David paid in this account. For a discussion of the portrayal of building and of the Davidic/Solomonic temple by the Chronicler, see Ehud Ben Zvi "The Book of Chronicles: Another Look," 2002 CSBS Presidential Address, University of Toronto, 8, 21-23).

[109] Most scholars see this in a symbolic way. Brodie, 265, describes how the "shadow of death gives way...to land." Janzen, 84, calls the purchase "symbolic of the progress toward God's promise." See also Alter, 111-2, Jeansonne, 29. Sarna, 156 refers to this as "an expression of faith (on the part of Abraham) that his descendants would indeed inherit the land." Speiser 171-2,

noteworthy if one allows the 400 shekels of silver to evoke the 400 years in which the people were to live outside of the land according to the promise recorded in Genesis 15:13. Others scholars have dismissed the correlation of this purchase and the promise of land. They suggest that to have paid a price for that which was meant to be a gift only highlights the disparity between the promise and its fulfilment.[110] Although none of the accounts of coming into the land involve claims over Machpelah, one can see the symbolic nature of being laid to rest in this possession or inheritance. Bruggemann makes this claim:

> The legal action of purchase is a full investment in a promise against the present circumstance. To be sure, such a reading of Gen. 23 goes beyond the explicit statement of the text. It presumes that this text, like others in Genesis, has promise just beneath its surface... .Thus even the death of the mother is shaped to be an occasion for deep trust in the promise.[111]

The price paid for this land gave, to Abraham and his descendants, indisputable ownership of the burial place. Yet the reason for this lengthy negotiation, in the midst of what is often a sparse narrative style, still causes the reader to question why this purchase was so important. One may ask, along with Sternberg, why Abraham is made

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makes the association more practical by linking the purchase with the necessity to bury the ancestors on land that belonged to them.

[110] See Sternberg, 33, who views this purchase as an "ironic non-fulfilment," suggesting that if this gift of land could be purchased, Abraham would certainly have done so at the earliest opportunity. He further suggests that the great price paid exemplified exactly how far they are from the fulfilment, 47, 56. Von Rad, 249-50, maintains that the events related in the burial of Sarah are decisively not sacred aetiology and not a future land claim. However, he suggests that the ancestors are rewarded and are no longer strangers in death. Jason Bray suggests that this is to be chiefly understood as a polemic against the cult worship of surrounding cultures and is therefore aimed at making death and burial pragmatic rather than sacred, "Genesis 23—A Priestly Paradigm for Burial," *JSOT* vol. 60 (1993) 70-71.

[111] Walter Bruggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: Knox, 1982), 196-7.

to go to great effort and expense, all of which are carefully recorded, to secure this indisputable claim to a burial place "instead of burying Sarah in decent silence."[112] Some scholars claim that effort to secure this place reflects Abraham's deep regard for Sarah, or her ultimate vindication from her treatment in Egypt.[113] Others suggest that the purchase reflects the ordinary duties of a patriarch nearing the end of his life: he can neither bury his wife in foreign soil, nor marry his son to a foreign woman (ch. 24).[114] The first suggestion, while appealing, hardly warrants such a detailed description in an otherwise often cursory narrative. On the other hand, if the obligation of a patriarch to bury his wife on soil over which no foreigner can lay claim is so firmly entrenched, why is the same obligation not fulfilled in the case of Rachel? This text, in light of the various literary links, suggests a third option: that Sarah's burial in the cave of Machpelah was not the result of Abraham's obligation to the promise, but rather the fulfilment of a promise made also to Sarah.

The promise of land, as embodied in the purchase of Machpelah, is far more than a physical space. It is composed of elements laden with their own symbolic freight. Only when these elements – cave, field, land and trees – are added together is an inheritance created. Initially, Abraham asks Ephron only for a cave in which to bury Sarah. The request is to be modest, quietly taking up space at the edges of a field. Had this request been granted, Abraham would have purchased an inheritance reserved for death. Yet the cave itself whispers of more than death. Like wombs, caves are

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[112] Sternberg, "Double Talk," 30.
[113] Teubal, *Sarah,* 94-5, suggests that Sarah was a priestess in her own right, and therefore merited great honour. Brodie, 268, suggests that the honour afforded Sarah in the account of her death and burial reverses her dishonour in Egypt. Sarna credits the amount of text given over to this subject with the importance of Sarah and the respect of the Israelites for proper burial, 156.
[114] See Sternberg, "Double Talk," 31, Speiser 171-2, and von Rad 250. Westermann, 376, completely dissociates the narrative with the promise of land, suggesting that it is concerned, as were many of the texts attributed to the Priestly source, with the important passages of family life (birth, marriage and death).

associated with hidden waters, with secret spaces and with birth or rebirth. The cave is an internal place, much like the tent which is associated with the first matriarch (18:9; 24:67); and much like the deadened womb of Sarah in which life is miraculously engendered. This earthen cavern is also a liminal place, emphasized by its marginalized location in the text. Hidden at the edge of the field is the cave purchased to hold the woman whose womb held the first child of the promise and who was the first to be laid to rest in the womb of the earth.

What Ephron offers, instead of merely a cave, is the field including the cave. Fields are places of life and growth; they are associated with creation and fertility. The term זֶרַע is used for both seeds which produce plants (e.g. 1:11) as well as for offspring or descendants (e.g. 12:7). Into fields, as into wombs, are planted seeds which bring forth life. Even as the creation account speaks of the beasts of the field (e.g. 2:5, 19-20), so Esau is called a man of the field because of his wildness and his fondness for the outdoors (25:27; 27:27). Mandrakes, themselves a symbol of fertility, are found in a field by Reuben and become a source of bargaining power and of fertility for his mother Leah (30:14-21).[115] Fields are also places of decisions, dreams and transformations. Cain makes a life-altering decision in a field when he kills his brother Abel and is condemned to exile from the land (4:8-16). Jacob, after wrestling with an angel and making peace with his brother, buys the field on which he pitches his tent (33:19). Joseph's destiny as ruler over his brothers comes to him in part through a dream of sheaves bowing down in the field (34:7). Fields are also places of mysterious and significant encounters. Isaac wanders, without comfort, in a field until he encounters Rebekah. The power of their meeting is obvious by its effect on Rebekah, who falls from her camel (24:63-65).

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[115] This is ironic, considering that the mandrakes were traded to Rachel and should have been a source of fertility for her.

Joseph meets Rachel at a well in a field; similarly moved, he kisses her and weeps (29:2, 9-11). In a strange insertion into the narrative, Joseph encounters an unnamed man in a field on his way to find his brothers (37:12-17). The stranger directs him to the place where his brothers conspire to kill him, but instead sell him to the Midianites who transport him to Egypt (37:18-28). Fields, mysterious and transformative, speak of life and growth.

The addition of the field to the cave expands the inheritance, even as the expanding promise was previously demonstrated in the names of the ancestors and the addition of offspring. "Cave" becomes "field and cave." When Abraham accepts Ephron's inclusion of the field, and offers him the price of the field, Ephron refers to the combination of cave and field as "land." In a very real sense, the cave added to the field --death imbued with fertility and the promise of life--becomes symbolic of the land of the inheritance.[116]

The life hidden in the cave and the field springs forth as trees are planted into the narrative description of the holding. The field is verdant and productive. The trees rustle with their own mysterious life. Trees, particularly the trees of life and of the knowledge of good and evil, are central to the story of creation and the introduction of the curse (2:9-3:24). Trees comprise the ark that carries Noah and his family on the crest of the recreating flood (6:14). Under the boughs of trees, the promise is given to Abraham (12:6-7) and given for the first time in the hearing of Sarah (18:1-15). On the split trees of the wood of offering, Abraham places the bound son of the promise (ch. 22). Jacob purifies himself and his household as he buries the symbols of foreign gods under the

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[116] Janzen, 84-5: "Thus, death is made to speak of life beyond itself."

oak trees (35:4).[117] Trees are generally a symbol of the ability to sustain life, and therefore offer hope for the future (Isa 56:3; cf. Jer 23:5). However, the trees of this particular field are even more explicitly evocative of life and fertility. The final description of the land includes the note that the field with its trees faces Mamre, recalling the all-important visit by the messengers under the oaks of Mamre.

Fittingly, the woman made fertile by the promise is "planted" in the field of Machpelah. If there is any doubt that the promise is also for her, it is put to rest with the final description of Sarah's burial. In death, she looks to Mamre: the place where she was told she would have a son, and where her silent laughter gave Isaac his name. She is the first to enter into her inheritance in the land, buried facing the promise.

The Excluded Women: Hagar and Ketura

If Sarah's burial in the Cave of Machpelah highlights her inclusion in the promise narrative, it is also important to recognize who was *not* buried in the cave. While alive, Sarah shared Abraham, to at least some degree, with her *shifhah* Hagar.[118] After Sarah's death, the text records Abraham's marriage to Ketura, and the birth of six children. Abraham is reported to have concubines,[119] yet these women do not receive burial in the family tomb with him. Hagar, Ketura and their offspring exist outside the line

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[117] The importance of trees continues outside of Genesis. Under trees, altars are built (Jos 24), wisdom administered (Jud 4:4-5), angelic visits occur (Jud 6:11-12), kings are crowned (Jud 8:31-9:1), and so on.

[118] The term *shifhah* is often translated "maiden" or "handmaiden," see Hamilton (1990:442, 444), Spires (1964: 116), and von Rad (1972:190). Alter (1996: 67) argues that this translation obscures with an inaccurate sense of gentility the reality of the status of *shifhah*, i.e. a slave and, therefore, the legal property of her owner. Sarna (1989:119) further points to the fact that Sarah "had" Hagar (וְלָהּ שִׁפְחָה מִצְרִית) as an emphasis on Sarah's ownership rights. Westermann (1985:238) suggests that *shifhah* refers not merely to a slave girl, but one in a "relationship of personal trust to" her female owner.

[119] The text refers to Abraham's concubines. This is generally assumed to refer to Hagar and Ketura. Hagar is usually referred to as the שִׁפְחָה of Sarah (see note above), once as being given to Abraham as a wife (לְאִשָּׁה) (16:3) and she is called a handmaid (הָאָמָה) (21:10, 12-13). Ketura is clearly the wife of Abraham according to the text (25:1).

of the promise and therefore do not inherit the piece of land that is the possession of Sarah. The first of these two women, Hagar, is involved with Abraham in an attempt to circumvent the means by which the Lord has chosen to deliver the promise. The second woman, Ketura, is the wife of Abraham after the promise has already moved on to Isaac. This does not, however, leave these women without blessing. Although they are not bearers of the promise, the promise continually connects and reconnects to these other lines of descent.

Choosing always necessitates exclusion. According to Brenner, one of the sub-themes in the plot of "birth of the hero" narratives is the conflict between pairs of potential mothers which necessitates the expulsion of one. These pairs of women, however, are at once contrasting and inexplicably bound. In many ways, Hagar functions as a shadow side of Sarah. She is foreign and fertile, whereas Sarah is of the family line but barren. Sarah is "taken" as a wife, although there is no certain consummation, by the Egyptian Pharaoh. Conversely, Hagar is "taken" by Abraham in a relationship consummated with a legitimate marriage. The union between Sarah and Egypt is oddly incomplete, as is the union between Hagar and Abraham. Brenner describes the pairs of women as

> ...the paradigmatic pairs...bound tightly together in many ways, so much so that no single member of a given pair is a full personality in her own right but just a psychological segment. [120]

The reasons for Hagar's expulsion from the main promise narrative is discussed at length by scholars, particularly those with an interest in the voices of the marginalized or oppressed. Hagar can be viewed as a symbol of double exclusion: she is both a woman and a foreigner. The fact that she is an Egyptian is noted frequently in the

descriptions of her (16:1, 3; 21:9). According to Rulon-Miller, "Hagar *is* Egypt."[121] She is the "other" who is feminine, fertile and foreign, a paradigm not uncommon in biblical texts. Symbolically, Hagar represents the allure of a fertile foreign land.[122] Brenner argues that Hagar's expulsion is a case in which God sides with the dominant characters at the expense of the "other" and chooses the oppressor over the oppressed.[123] If this is the case, the exclusion of Hagar from the Cave of Machpelah would represent a further expulsion of the rejected matriarch.

In examining the portrayal of Hagar and her absence from the burial cave, one must consider the narratives concerning Hagar both when Abraham and Sarah are present and when they are not. While under the power of her mistress, Hagar is passive and acted upon by others. She is given to Abraham, after presumably being given to Sarah initially (perhaps by Pharaoh, 12:16), and then returned to the power of Sarah (16:6). Teubal describes her as silent, without authority and as merely a womb.[124] Fewell and Gunn describe her as humiliated, acted upon, broken and sacrificed.[125] In this regard, Hagar appears as a victim. The role that Hagar plays in the story, however, does not simply represent that of a foreigner, woman or slave. Above all, the events of

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[120] Brenner, 259-60.
[121] Rulon-Miller, 62.
[122] Iain M. Duguid, "Hagar the Egyptian: A Note on the Allure of Egypt in the Abraham Cycle," *Westminster Theological Journal* 56:2 (1994), 419-21. Duguid, 419, suggests that the allure of the fertile and foreign woman is symbolic of the allure of the equally fertile and foreign land from which she comes. However, in every case, the choice of the foreign is proven to be wrong. "...[C]hoosing the fertility of Egypt over faithfulness to the promise leads to disastrous consequences." This serves to underscore the correct answer to the refrain, "Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" (Num 14:3). Duguid, 42.
[123] See Trible *Texts of Terror,* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 22. Trible points out that Hagar is sent out "to protect the inheritance of her oppressors," *Terror,* 25. Jo Ann Hackett, "Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern," *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel,* ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 12-27. Hackett, 24-5, in comparing Hagar's story to the Ugaritic epic of Aqhat, suggests that the story is designed to create sympathy for the oppressed.
[124] Teubal, *Hagar,* xxi.
[125] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender,* 51.

Hagar's life under the control of Abraham and Sarah reflect the results when the first generation of ancestors try to effect the promise without divine involvement.

However, when the pregnant and mistreated servant flees into the wilderness, a very different Hagar emerges, one described more as victor than victim. Hagar, the property of a mistress and the sexual partner of a master, neither of whom speak to her or call her by name, is addressed by a messenger of the Lord in the wilderness. The angel speaks directly to Hagar, calling her by her name and by her status as Sarah's maid (16:7-8). There is no doubt that Hagar is known, both by her own identity and by the situation from which she is trying to escape. Despite this "knowing," the angel asks Hagar where she has come from and where she is going. The question gives her an opportunity to respond with either truth or an evasion of it, just as other characters in Genesis are likewise questioned. [126] Even as the angel is the first in the text to speak directly to Hagar, so Hagar speaks for the first time in the narrative directly to a messenger of the Lord. She explains that she is fleeing from her mistress. She does not answer the last part of the question posed to her, because there is no answer: she has nowhere to go "to," only somewhere to run away "from." Hagar is without place, wandering in the wilderness.

Hagar's time in the wilderness is suggestive of the time Israel will later spend in the same wilderness. As Dozeman notes in a study examining the concepts of wilderness and salvation in the story of Hagar, she is the first to encounter God in the wilderness, an event which will be repeated by Moses and eventually by all the children

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[126] One can think of God's questions to Adam and Eve in the garden (3:8-13), and the question posed to Cain about the whereabouts of his brother (4:9). The same "knowing" question appears to be asked when the messengers appear to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre and inquire about Sarah by name and by her status as his wife (18:9). For an examination of the dialogue between the messenger and Hagar, see Toba Spitzer, "'Where Do You Come From and Where are You Going?': Hagar and Sarah Encounter God," *Reconstructionist* 63:1 (1998), 8-18.

of Israel (Ex 3:1-4:17; 13:18, 21).[127] Hagar first encounters the messenger/the Lord at a well on the way to Shur. Shur is described as east of Egypt; it is the place to which Moses will lead the children of Israel after they have crossed the Red Sea (Ex 15:22). The wilderness, by nature a liminal and transitional place, will lie as a border between Egypt and the land that is to be the inheritance of Isaac. It points to the place where the children of Ishmael, himself a character on the edges of the promise, will eventually settle (25:18).

Though the offspring of Hagar will later settle in the wilderness, she does not find refuge there yet. The angel instructs Hagar to leave this wilderness, to return to her mistress and to submit to the yoke of Sarah's authority. In this text, according to Phyllis Trible, "an abused, yet courageous woman" is given "a divine word of terror."[128] This apparent disregard for Hagar's well-being is contrasted by the following words which echo the language of the promise to Abraham: *"I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count"* (16:10b). Despite the similarities to the pronouncement to Abraham, this is a distinct and unmediated promise given to Hagar.

This promise is followed by the bible's first annunciation scene (16:11):

The angel of the LORD said to her further,

"Behold, you are with child,

And you will bear a son;

And you shall call his name Ishmael,

Because the LORD has given heed to your affliction."

Despite commanding her to return to her oppressor, the messenger tells Hagar that the Lord has heard her and is responding to her plight. "Seeing" and "hearing" play

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[127] Thomas B. Dozeman, "The Wilderness and Salvation History in the Hagar Story," *JBL* 117 (1998), 23-43; 24.

important roles in the story of Hagar. The messenger tells Hagar that the Lord has "heard" her and that she will have a son, whom she is to call Ishmael, meaning "God hears." The description of the location of the encounter – a spring on the road to Shur – makes a play on the words for sight (16:7). בַּמִּדְבָּר עַל־הָעַיִן בְּדֶרֶךְ שׁוּר A spring of water is clearly indicated by the first part of the text (עַל־עֵין הַמַּיִם), but the same word for "spring" can also mean "eye." *Shur* may mean "to see" or "to behold" (Num 24:17).[129] Hagar is at least figuratively at an eye (or place of seeing) on the road to seeing. She responds by naming God אֵל רֳאִי ("God of Seeing" or "God who Sees"). Hagar's explanation for this name is difficult to translate with certainty. Interpreters following Wellhausen suggest that she is claiming to have "seen after seeing" or that she has lived after seeing the living God. Hamilton uses the term "seen the back of him who sees me" as a parallel to Moses who saw God's back (Ex 33:23).[130] The name of the well also reflects sight: it is called "the well of the living one who sees me" (בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי).

The naming of God is a dramatic act, and one not to be repeated by any character in the Hebrew Bible.[131] Hagar's boldness, and her claim to have seen and/or be seen by God, is the subject of much feminist scholarship. For this act, Trible bestows on Hagar the title of "theologian," whereas Reis claims that if she is a theologian, she is "a bad one," failing to recognize the particular characteristics of YHWH.[132] As a

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[128] Trible, *Terror,* 16.
[129] See discussion in Sarna, 120.
[130] Hamilton, 455-6.
[131] See discussion in Trible, *Terror,* 18, Hamilton, 455.
[132] Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Hagar Requited," *JSOT* 87 (2000), 75-109, quote from 93. According to Reis, this is Hagar's final mistake (the first being that Hagar did not have a plan of where to go and the second being that she did not respond immediately to the messenger's instructions to go). Hagar's failure is that she does not recognize YHWH as the "all-encompassing God" and therefore loses the chance to be the mother of the promise and must ever after know God only as Elohim and not the personal God of the chosen patriarchs and matriarchs.

character, Hagar comes into being when she is separated from her position of servant/slave. Although submissive and silent in the texts which include Sarah and Abraham, Hagar speaks and acts when in the presence of the Lord.

Hagar encounters the Lord a second time in the wilderness, this time when she is cast out by Abraham and Sarah. When Sarah brings a second complaint to Abraham, God assures Abraham that he need not worry. God had already promised to Abraham that Ishmael would be multiplied, and would become the father of twelve princes (17:20). The Lord reiterates the promise, telling the patriarch that he can relinquish the life of this first-born child to the Lord, who will bless him and take responsibility for him (21:13). Given this assurance, Abraham sends the mother and child away with what appears to be little more than a day's ration. Having exhausted the meagre provisions and about to die of thirst, Hagar casts Ishmael under a bush and moves away so that she will not see her son die (21:16). Once again the Lord responds, and Hagar is given sight. This sight is of a life-giving well in the barren wilderness (21:19) from which she nourishes her son.

This time, Hagar is left in the wilderness. Trible views this as abandonment: "...she experiences exodus without liberation; revelation without salvation; wilderness without covenant; wanderings without land; promise without fulfilment; and unmerited exile without return."[133] While Hagar is excluded from the main plot line of the promise, however, she is not erased from the larger narrative. The similarities between her story and that of Moses and the children of Israel, noted by Dozeman, function to "embed her story in a large history in which parallels are created between the lives of Hagar and Moses, and also between the Ishmaelites and Israelites."[134] The reconnection between the excluded and the included, demonstrated by this correlation, is a recurrent theme

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[133] Trible, Terror, 238. Phillip Drey, in shocking contrast, calls Hagar a "partner in the covenant," 181.

throughout the narratives,[135] and will be further explored. Contrary to Trible's assessment, Hagar is not left without promise. While it is true that Hagar and Ishmael are not to inherit the promise given to Abraham, Hagar is nonetheless given her own promise. Her descendants will be, as Abraham's, numerous. Like Sarah, she will be the mother of nations. Princes will be born to her offspring. Her child, like Sarah's, is the subject of an annunciation scene and is named by the Lord. Like the child of the promise, her son is brought to the brink of death and then miraculously rescued by the Lord. Although the attempt to procure the promise through human means is not rewarded, Hagar is not ultimately abandoned. Her role in the promise narrative is limited and silent, but her existence as a character alongside the promise is validated in a variety of ways. Hagar is a bearer of blessing, but she is not a bearer of the promise, explaining her exclusion from the family burial cave. This place is reserved for the matriarch whose involvement in the promise was not the result of human intervention, as was the case with Hagar, but rather the result of divine intervention.

If Hagar represents human intervention before the fulfilment of the promise by divine means, then Ketura represents human relationships after the promise has been fulfilled and passed on. Ketura, whom Abraham marries after the death of Sarah, does not share the main promise narrative, nor the family tomb at Hebron. In fact, Abraham's final family is scarcely mentioned in the text. The fact that they are mentioned at all is perhaps the most significant part. After his part in the unfolding drama ends, Abraham

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[134] Dozemann, 24.

[135] This inclusion of the excluded will be discussed at various points as the narrative returns to reincorporate through marriage and place the offspring of the main line of promise with the offspring of the excluded line of Ishmael. See John Goldingay, "The Place of Ishmael," *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives,* ed. Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1998), 146-49, esp. 148. Goldingay examines the role of Ishmael in the Genesis narratives and concludes that it is ideologically significant that this son occupies as much of the text as the other son of Abraham. He points to the importance of Ishmael as an example of the "tension between particularism and universality" which points to an expanded promise.

moves out of the main plot line into a subplot. As the call and promise is passed down to another generation, Abraham slips out of the promise narrative. He "dies" to the main story line. Because he is no longer the carrier of the promise, he is free to go on and marry another woman, raise a family, and die at a ripe old age, outside the responsibility of the patriarchal role.

The movement of the promise beyond Abraham takes place in stages: the patriarch is separated first from Hagar and Ishmael, then from Isaac, and finally from Sarah. The similarities between the expulsion of Ishmael and the binding of Isaac are apparent.[136] In both cases, the Lord commands that the patriarch give up a son. In each story, Abraham arises early and follows the command of the Lord. Each son is laid out to die, cast under the bushes (21:15) or bound on the altar (22:9). As the life of each child is in imminent danger, a messenger of the Lord calls out, and the son is spared. By the intervention of the Lord, the child is not to die but is to live and be blessed.

The Lord clearly claims the life of the sons whom he brings to the point of death and then rescues. In a symbolic way, the children are no longer Abraham's, but YHWH's. This is demonstrated by the language used of Abraham and his sons. When asked to send Ishmael away, Abraham is distressed because of "his son" (21:11). However, when commanded to go to Mt. Moriah, Abraham is told to take his son – his "only son" – Isaac (22:2). Ishmael, already removed from the main story line, has been further removed when the Lord takes over the protection and care of the boy. A similar phenomenon happens with Isaac. Despite the survival of both boys, these two incidents mark the narrative "deaths" of the father and son relationship. Ishmael does not return from the wilderness. At no time after leaving the altar on Mt. Moriah are Abraham and

Isaac brought together in the narrative until after Abraham's death. Both sacrificed sons come together to bury the patriarch, but he has "died" to them much earlier. When Abraham buries Sarah, a chapter in the narrative closes and his active role as a patriarch ceases.

The fact that Abraham's role as first generation patriarch is ending is demonstrated by the language employed to describe Abraham's action. Abraham's literary introduction (11:27-31) is brief, but his active role as patriarch of the promise begins in the following verses. Abraham is instructed to "Go..." (12:1), and that is what he does. Chapter after chapter of the patriarch's life begins with his movement to one place or another. He goes to Canaan (Gen 12:5), to Bethel (Gen 12:8), on toward the Negev (Gen 12:9), to Egypt (Gen 12:10), back to the Negev (Gen 13:1), and so on. When the three men/messengers appear to him at the oaks of Mamre, Abraham is characterized by frenzied activity (Gen 18:6-8). However, the activity that characterizes Abraham in his role as a patriarch comes to an end. Once the patriarch's hand has been raised to slay the boy, and the Lord has stayed his hand, Abraham's movements on behalf of Isaac have come to an end. Later in the narrative, when securing a wife for Isaac, Abraham abandons his usual flurry of activity and sends someone else in his place. As with the sacrifice at Moriah, Abraham maintains that the Lord will provide (Gen 24:7, cf. Gen 22:8). A similar closure takes place with the burial of Sarah. The active patriarch is engaged in a flurry of movement: he goes in (v.2), he rises up (v. 3), he rises up and bows (v. 7) and he bows again (12). Not only does the patriarch move, but he also negotiates in a strong and insistent voice, not unlike his earlier negotiations with the Lord over the fate of Sodom (18:22-33). The complex web of sound and

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[136] See Scott Nikaido, "Hagar and Ishmael as Literary Figures: An Intertextual Study," *VT* 51:2 (2001), 219-42. In a detailed study of Hagar and Ishmael, Scott Nikaido equates Hagar's second

movement which characterizes the negotiations for Sarah's burial place is oddly contrasted to Abraham's subsequent disinterest in handling similar negotiations on behalf of Isaac to procure a wife. Abraham is finished moving and negotiating within the promise narrative. Hagar and Ishmael have been sent away to their distinct fate and their distinct promise. The Lord has claimed responsibility for the lives of both of Abraham's sons. Sarah has been laid to rest in the land of promise. Isaac will assume his adult life as the next generation patriarch in his marriage to Rebekah. The patriarch is now free to "retire" from his active role in the narrative, and go on to another life. [137]

Only in death, in fulfilment of the promise narrative, does Abraham return to his role as patriarch, coming into rest in the land with Sarah. In the course of his life, Abraham had two wives, concubines and at least eight sons (25:1-11). However, in his burial, the narrative reverts back to the main story line: Abraham is credited with one wife (Sarah) and two sons (25:9-10). Prior to his death, Abraham gives gifts (מַתָּנֹת) to the sons of his *pilagshim* (וְלִבְנֵי הַפִּילַגְשִׁים); however, to Isaac he gives all that was his (אֵת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ) (25:5-6). Similarly, Ketura does not play a role in the promise narrative, and another burial place is hers.

As in the story of Hagar, however, there is an undercurrent at work which does not abandon the "other" women or regard them as merely incidental to the events. A tension exists in the text. While the primary story line seems to continually *exclude*, there is an undercurrent of *inclusion* and diversity within the promise. While there is a

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trip in the wilderness with Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac on Mt. Moriah.

[137] The ability to move out of the promise narrative indicates that "patriarch" should be understood as a role and not an identity. This shift takes the emphasis off the identity and character of Abraham, and places it on to the unfolding events. As such, it may be possible to shift our focus away from the "gender" of the texts and focus instead on the role of the characters, male or female. If Abraham was important because of the role he played and not because of his identity,

particular emphasis on one family line, there exists frequently a harkening back to various branches of the family not contained in the main story line. Isaac, the child of the promise, is never completely cut off from Ishmael, but joins with him in burying their father (25:9). Isaac is furthermore associated with Beer-lahai-roi (24:62; 25:11), which plays such an important part in the story of Hagar and Ishmael. The children born to Ketura[138] include Midian, from whom the Midianites are descended (25:1-6). The Midianites, here identified with the Ishmaelites, are the traders who buy Joseph and transport him to Egypt (37:25-28). Although this may appear to be a less than flattering connection, Joseph himself claims that the events were sanctioned by the Lord (45:5). When fleeing from Egypt, Moses travels into the land of the Midianites and meets seven women at a well, who turn out to be the daughters of the Midianite priest Jethro (Ex 2:15-22). After watering their flocks, Moses is given one daughter, Zipporah, as his wife. The propriety of this union is demonstrated by the use of the "betrothal-at-the-well" type-scene, and by the fact that Jethro participates in a sacrificial meal with Aaron and the elders and that he offers advice to Moses in the wilderness (Ex 18:12-26). These "other" descendants are never excluded completely, but continue to play a role even when the promise moves on through the designated family line.

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then it is possible to re-examine the role that other (i.e. female) characters play, even within undeniably patriarchal settings, without predetermined limitations arising because of their gender.

[138] It is notable that the text refers to these children as the descendants of Ketura (25:4) and not Abraham.

V. The First (and Only) Wife of the Second Generation: Rebekah

Rebekah, the second-generation matriarch, is the daughter of Bethuel and the granddaughter of Milcah and Nahor, brother of Abraham (22:20-23). She is also the sister of Laban (25:20). Abraham's servant, commissioned to find a wife for Isaac from among Abraham's family, travels to the city of Nahor. He receives a dramatic answer to his prayer when Rebekah appears at the well, gives him a drink of water and offers to water his camels. She accepts the servant's proposal of marriage to Isaac and embarks immediately to meet her husband (24:1-67). Rebekah is initially barren (25:21). The Lord answers Isaac's prayer for her womb to be opened, and she becomes pregnant (25:21-22). When twins in her womb are struggling, Rebekah inquires of the Lord and receives an oracle prophesying that the younger son would rule the elder (25:22-24). She gives birth to two sons: Esau, a man of the field and the favorite of his father; and Jacob, a man dwelling in tents and the favorite of his mother (25:24-28). She is passed off as Isaac's sister when they travel to Gerar during a famine (26:1-11). Rebekah orchestrates the events by which Jacob usurps the blessing of the firstborn (27:1-40). When Esau vows revenge against his brother, Rebekah arranges for Jacob to flee to her brother Laban to save her son's life (27:41-45). Weary of the Hittite wives of Esau, Rebekah extracts a promise from Jacob via Isaac that he will not marry outside of the family line (27:46-28:2). After arranging for the marriage of Jacob, Rebekah disappears from the narrative. She is mentioned again briefly in the death notice of Deborah, her nurse (35:8). Her burial in the cave of Machpelah is noted by Jacob after the fact when he is nearing his own life and makes a request to be buried there (49:31).

Literary Links to the Promise

Perhaps no matriarch is as dynamic a character as Rebekah. The story of her encounter with Abraham's servant at the well is one of the longest single narrative

sequences in Genesis. In her story, as was the case with Sarah, literary links to the promise narratives are evident; by the time she is buried in the cave of Machpelah, Rebekah is already well-established as an important matriarch in the succession of the promise.

One of the most lengthy of the literary links between Rebekah's story and those of the other patriarchs and matriarchs is the use of the "encounter-at-the-well" betrothal type-scene, so clearly described by scholars such as Robert Alter, Esther Fuchs and James G. Williams.[139] This type-scene is repeated at least three times in the Hebrew Bible, and evidence of similar type-scenes exist in the literature of cultures surrounding the world of Ancient Israel.[140] In this scene, typically, *a prospective husband travels to another land*, meets *a beautiful virgin at a well* and *performs a noble or heroic deed for her*. She goes to her *father's house* to tell them of the stranger. After some indication of the utter suitability of the match (generally due to family connections), *the men agree to a betrothal* and the *marriage* takes place. Because these type-scenes develop particular expectations, the variations on these expectations are important to note. Our expectations allow us to read meaning in the words, but also in the diversions from the patterns. Alter puts it this way: "It is through our tacit awareness of how such

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[139] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981) 47-62. Fuchs, "Structure" 273-281. J. Williams, "The Beautiful and Barren," *JSOT* 17 (1980), 107-19; quote from 109.

[140] These three include the betrothals of Isaac and Rebekah (24:1-67), Jacob and Rachel (29:1-20) and Moses and Zipporah (Ex 2:15b-21). Alter also notes that this type-scene is evoked in other cases, either directly or by its absence, *Biblical Narrative*, 58-62. He suggests that it can be found in the betrothal of Ruth to Boaz, in which case the woman travels to the "foreign" land of Judea; it is initiated but then "aborted" in the case of Saul (1 Sam 9:11-12), and it is deliberately "omitted" in what amounts to an anti-type-scene in the story of Samson (Jud 14:1-20). Williams claims that the type-scene exists in "*reverse fashion*" in the story of Ruth (emphasis his), J. Williams, *Women Recounted: Narrative Thinking and the God of Israel* (Sheffield: Almond, 1982), 84. For its existence in Ugaritic literature, see Kenneth Aitken, "The Wooing of Rebekah: A Study in the Development of the Tradition," *JSOT* 30 (1984) 3-23. Aitken notes similar patterns in the tale of Keret. Elements in common with the story of Rebekah include the following: lack of a wife; commission to secure a wife; travel to the land/city of the future bride; rendering of divine aid;

conventions are supposed to operate that we are able to make sense of narrative literature."[141] In the betrothal of Isaac and Rebekah, the changes are numerous.

The first element of the type-scene contains a variation. Rather than the prospective husband travelling to a different land, it is *a servant* who goes in his place. In fact, Abraham is adamant that Isaac is not to leave. Twice he warns the servant not to take his son to the land from which the patriarch had come (24:5-8). Abraham's prohibition may be based on his insistence that the promise continually move forward and not back, or it may arise out of concern for his sensitive and delicate son. In either case, the effect is to heighten the image of Isaac as one acted upon rather than acting. His inaction intensifies the dynamic character of Rebekah. Alter describes Isaac as "the most passive of all the patriarchs" compared to Rebekah, who is "forceful and enterprising."[142]

Isaac's lack of participation in this scene is further highlighted by the fact that his replacement is not only a servant, but an *unnamed servant.* The text reveals that the servant is the oldest in Abraham's household, and clearly in a position of great trust (24:2). Attempts to identify the servant with Eliezer (of 15:2) are merely speculation;[143] in fact, he remains anonymous in the text. The effect of this anonymity is to further reduce the role being played by the suitor. Not only is a substitute taking the place of the hero in the story, but he is also an unknown substitute. Westermann suggests that this omission of a proper name may have the effect of pointing always back to Abraham, since the servant draws his identity solely from this relationship.[144] This would certainly

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beauty of the bride remarked; negotiations for the wife; sending off the bride; marriage blessing; travel back with the bride; and marriage, 12.

[141] Alter, "Convention," 115.

[142] Alter, "Convention," 115.

[143] Some commentaries simply assume the identity of the servant as Eliezer. See Janzen, 86. Regarding the uncertainty of this position, see Speiser, 178 and 183.

[144] Westermann, (12-36), 384.

fit a pattern in which Isaac's behaviour mirrors that of his father.[145] Unlike his wife, Isaac remains primarily in the shadows in his own narratives.

The anonymity of the servant may also emphasize the transitional nature of the events being told: the promise is, in a sense, temporarily placed into the hands of someone other than the patriarch. Abraham can do so because of his insistence that the Lord will do the guiding and choosing (24:7). The transition which occurs between Abraham and Isaac is demonstrated by the fact that the servant begins the narrative with Abraham as his master (e.g. 24:2) and ends the narrative as Isaac's servant (24:65).[146] A transition has taken place: one that will also occur for the women of the promise.

Unlike the absent Isaac, Rebekah fulfils to excess the second expectation of the type-scene. She appears at the well as though miraculously summoned by the prayer of the servant: "before he had finished speaking, behold! Rebekah" (24:15). She is of the correct family line: born to Bethuel, the son of Milcah, wife of Abraham's brother Nahor (24:15). This initial information given about her mirrors Rebekah's literary introduction in the text prior to the death of Sarah (22:20-23). Clearly this fact not only legitimizes the matriarch as one of the right family, but also reaffirms that the servant found the "right" girl: i.e. the one whose birth had been previously announced. The text moves on to report that Rebekah is not only of the right family, but she also meets the other requirements: she is beautiful and a virgin. Von Rad describes this excess of expectation: "...the compliance goes beyond the request. The servant could not really expect that the girl would be directly from Nahor's house (v. 24), and that in addition to

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[145] Such as passing off his wife as his sister (26:1-11 cf. 12:10-19; 20:1-18), having confrontations over wells (26:18), and making covenants with Abimelech and Phicol (26:26-30 cf. 21:22-24).
[146] Sarna, 161. Sarna describes this transition well, and attributes the anonymity of the servant to his function in the story: "to forge the link between the generations." See also Janzen, 90-91. Janzen likewise points out that the failure to name the narrative's pivotal character highlights the transition which occurs just as much from Sarah to Rebekah as from Abraham to Isaac.

all of her excellent qualities she would also be beautiful!"[147] The information about Rebekah's lineage, withheld temporarily from the servant, is finally revealed to his great delight (24:23-27). It is the awaited confirmation: Rebekah is the answer to his prayers.[148]

Rebekah receives divine sanction numerous times in the text, thanks to the narrative technique of repetition. Each repetition includes a slight variation.[149] While Abraham tells the servant that the angel will lead him to a wife for Isaac, the servant repeats the promise in such a way that it applies even more specifically to Rebekah. A wife from "there" (i.e. the land of Abraham's birth) has become "a wife for my son from my relatives and from my father's house" (24:7, 40). He further emphasizes the need for this proper family connection by rearranging the order in which he gave gifts to Rebekah. In the narrative, he gave her a nose ring and bracelets after she met the criteria of the sign (24:22-23). In his account to Laban, the gifts were bestowed only after she satisfied the criteria of the correct family line (24:47). Clearly, according to the servant's account, only a woman with such close connections would do. He clearly relates to Laban his test to find the woman appointed (הֹכַחְתָּ) by the Lord (24:14, 44). In the narrative, the servant appears to speak aloud, whereas in his account of the events, he prays in his heart (24:15, 45). His test is conducted in secret in the second account, and therefore may be even more miraculous. His gratitude to God for steadfast love toward Abraham

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[147] Von Rad, 256.

[148] This point is made by numerous scholars, including Fuchs, "Structure," 9 and Williams, "Beautiful," 113. According to Williams, the narrative points to the "*guidance of God*: Rebeccah is a 'great find' who is providentially found and brought to Isaac. She is a gift" (emphasis his). See also Shubert Spero, "Multiplicity of Meaning as a Device in Biblical Narrative [Gen 24; Ex 4-10]," *Judaism* 34 (1985), 462-73. Spero, 467, calls her "miraculously chosen," and notes how the servant describes her this way.

[149] Sternberg suggests that all repetitions, even if done verbatim, necessitate variation since they are torn from their initial setting and retold in a different context. Poetics, 390. In this case, that includes a different narrative voice and a different audience.

and for leading "to the house of my master's kin" (24:27) becomes thanks for being led to this girl (24:48). While in each case the same general information in imparted, the repetition is engineered in such a way as to emphasize the divine nature of the choice of Rebekah. The servant's speech apparently works; on the surface of the dialogue, at least, Laban appears to be unable to disagree with this matter when it so clearly "comes from the LORD" (24:50-51).

For Rebekah to have been so clearly chosen by God forges its own literary link to the promise narratives. When Sarah had been unable to bear a child, Abraham appeared content to choose another woman to be the mother of his offspring. The Lord chose otherwise, however. Just as Sarah was clearly the Lord's choice as the first generation matriarch, so Rebekah was also chosen by the Lord as the second-generation matriarch.

Not surprisingly, this ideal woman takes over the lead in the third element of the type-scene. Instead of the hero performing a deed at the well, as would be expected, it is *the woman* who carries out a noble task. This task is an appropriate one to prefigure the role Rebekah is about to assume. She offers life-giving water, and that in abundance. Wells are part of the web of images that suggest fertility: places of "sustenance in the wilderness as water springs from the womb of Earth."[150] As such, wells are symbolically appropriate locations of betrothal scenes. From the well, water from the earth comes forth, offering "the promise of fertility to the prospective couple."[151]

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[150] Laura Hobgood-Oster, " 'For Out of that Well the Flocks were Watered': Stories of Wells in Genesis," in *The Earth Story in Genesis* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 199.
[151] Janzen, 87.

In providing water, however, Rebekah does not merely carry out a noble task. She again exceeds expectations with "a feat of 'Homeric' heroism."[152] Rather than simply "a little water from her jar" (24:17), Rebekah provides water for the servant and all ten of his camels "until they had finished drinking" (24:19): an addition to the text that appears in the speech of Rebekah. This was clearly no small task.

Her actions, however, do more than simply display her "true generosity" and willing spirit.[153] It also makes connections between this matriarch and Abraham, both of whom are portrayed in dynamic motion. Teugels characterizes her as "a 'doer', one who acts rather than speaks."[154] As Alter points out, no less than eleven verbs of action are used of her.[155] Her flurry of movement, combined with her hospitality toward the servant, is reminiscent of Abraham's activity when offering hospitality to the messengers at Mamre (18:3-8).[156] This comparison will set the stage for more parallels between this matriarch and the first patriarch. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, in a character study of Rebekah, suggests that this matriarch is deliberately described as each character's ideal:

> ...for Abraham Rebekah is his equal, from his family, with the same courage to dwell in a land that is as yet strange but promised; for the

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[152] Alter, *Genesis*, 116. The difficulty of the task is noted with great dismay by 19th century feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton: "It was certainly a good test of her patience and humility to draw water for an hour, with a dozen men looking on at their ease, and none offering to help. The Rebekahs of 1895 would have promptly summoned the spectators to share their labors, even at the risk of sacrificing a desirable matrimonial alliance. The virtue of self-sacrifice has its wise limitations." Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Women's Bible*, 1895 (Boston: Northeaster UP, 1993), 46.

[153] Sarna, 165. Von Rad, 256, maintains that the servant deliberately chooses a test to ascertain if the girl has "a woman's readiness to help, kindness of heart, and an understanding for animals." Sternberg notes her characterization in action, *Poetics*, 138.

[154] Lieve Teugels, "A Strong Woman, Who Can Find?": A Study of Characterization in Genesis 24 with Some Perspectives on the General Presentation of Isaac and Rebekah in the Genesis Narratives," *JSOT* 63 (1994), 89-104; 97.

[155] This is pointed out by Alter, 53-54; also by Meyers, 43.

[156] See Sternberg, *Poetics*, 138. For a summary of this comparison, see Davidson, 175.

> servant she is the ideal girl and even the woman chosen by YHWH; for her own family she is the daughter who bears the hopes of a great future; and for Isaac she becomes his beloved wife...Nevertheless readers are granted very limited insight into the character of Rebekah—she mainly remains the woman of someone else's dreams—and so readers are invited to add their own imagination and picture Rebekah as the woman of their dreams.[157]

In response to the speech of the stranger, and to the gifts he bestows, the virgin at the well runs to her *mother's* household and informs her family of the stranger. Throughout the narrative, Rebekah's father is omitted or overshadowed. The description of her home as "her mother's house," the subject of much scholarly debate and conjecture,[158] reflects an unusual degree of interest in the line of female descent in Rebekah's family. In her lineage, the name of her grandmother, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, is mentioned each time (22:20; 24:15, 24, 47). The appearance of the names of women in the genealogical lists tends to stand out, particularly when combined with the positive portrayal of Rebekah. Scholars such as Miller argue for the equality of women in these texts: "One narrative purpose of this story is clearly to endorse the line of Abraham as passing through divinely favoured women as well as men."[159]

The usual role of a woman in the type-scene is continued in the arrangements for betrothal, specifically in that *the woman is consulted* with regard to her wishes. From the

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[157] Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, "The Woman of Their Dreams: The Image of Rebekah in Genesis 24," *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives*, ed. Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1998), 90-101. Gillmayr-Bucher, 100-1.

[158] According to Speiser, 180-181 and to Westermann, "the reason for this can only be that her father was dead" 388. Hamilton suggests that it reflects the practise of a matrilineal society, 157. Referring to Song of Solomon 3:4; 8:2, Sarna claims that such a designation was a natural way for a girl to speak of her home, 166.

[159] Geoffrey P. Miller, *Contracts of Genesis* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993), 33. See also Turner, 42-47, and Davidson, 173-4.

outset, in the exchange between Abraham and the servant, the question of her willingness is raised and, furthermore, respected. If she is not willing to come, Abraham assures his servant, then the matter is closed and the oath is dissolved (24:5, 8). When her family would detain the servant from his intended departure date, Rebekah casts the deciding vote (24:57-58). The reason she is consulted, aside from any speculation on societal practise, becomes evident from a literary standpoint. Rebekah must be consulted because she must hear and respond to (or not respond to) a call similar to that of Abraham. Like the patriarch, she is asked to leave her country, her kindred and her (mother's) house. Just as Abraham went forth (וַיֵּלֶךְ), so Rebekah agrees with the words, "I will go" (אֵלֵךְ) (12:4, 24:58).[160] Whereas Isaac shadows his father's life, Rebekah is the one who truly follows the patriarch's footsteps. As she sets out to the land that the servant will show her, Rebekah receives a blessing that echoes Abraham's:

> *They blessed Rebekah and said to her*
> *"May you, our sister,*
> *Become thousands of ten thousands,*
> *And may your descendants possess*
> *The gate of those who hate them."* (24:60)

Abraham had likewise been promised numerous descendants who would "possess the gates of their enemies" (22:17). The text reports that Isaac is "blessed" by God after the death of his father (25:11), but he is not personally given a blessing or promise until much later in the text (26:1-5). Rebekah bears the promise before Isaac. Williams

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[160] For a detailed comparison of these commissionings, see Sarna, 161. See also Davidson, 173, and Jeansonne, 53.

notes, "With this blessing the narrator quietly moves Rebecca into the cycle of God's promise to the patriarchs."[161]

The final component of the betrothal type-scene – the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah – is a significant narrative, filled with symbolic actions and images drawn from previous stories. These images begin with creation and with a beautiful retelling of the joining of man and woman. The meeting between the couple takes place in the evening when Isaac is wandering in the field. As noted above, fields carry connotations of fertility, mystery and transformation. Isaac's particular actions in the field are much discussed;[162] however, it is apparent that he is alone and without any companion. His father is not present in the story, and his mother has died. Like Adam, who was likewise without companion, the Lord brings a woman to end the man's loneliness (cf. 2:20-22). As she draws near, Isaac and Rebekah both "lift their eyes" to see one another (24:63-64). Claus Westermann points out that the raising of one's eyes is often used as a means of introducing an event.[163] It is indicative, in some cases, of sexual awareness, as in the garden of Eden (3:7).[164] At the first sight of Isaac, Rebekah falls down from her camel (24:64). The phrase וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגָּמָל is often translated as "dismounted" or "slipped quickly" from her camel. However, it is the same word (וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם) which is used of Abraham when he hears that Sarah will be the mother of his child (17:17). Isaac, it seems, continues to have this effect on people. Having lifted her eyes and seen

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[161] Williams, 44.

[162] For example, Gregory Vall reviews twelve translations for the phrase לָשׂוּחַ in his article "What Was Isaac Doing in the Field (Genesis XXIV 63)?" in *VT* 44 (1994), 513-523. He settles on a translation indicating that Isaac went "to complain" to God in loneliness. Gary A Rendsburg counters this conclusion with a return to the briefly popular translation of "urinate" or "defecate." "*Lasuah* in Genesis XXIV 63," in *VT* 45 (1995), 558-560. Westermann, 390, suggests "stroll" on the basis of 24:65.

[163] Westermann, 390.

[164] See also the linkage between eyes/sight and sexuality in the story of Samson (Judg 14-16).

her husband, Rebekah covers herself with a veil: a fitting adornment for a bride, but also an act of modesty not unlike that taken by Adam and Eve (3:7). After the repetitive narration and long monologues of the preceding verses, the servant's report is now cut to a single line. Taking Rebekah into his mother's tent, Isaac finds companionship and comfort for the loss of his mother in the arms of his wife (24:67). Again the story of Adam and Eve is evoked: the man at last "leaves" his mother and father and is joined in one flesh with his wife (cf. 2:24). This idyllic marriage, in which comfort and companionship replace the shame of the first couple, not only exemplifies the ideal nature of Rebekah, but also casts in a more positive light the innocence and naiveté that are often mistaken for weakness in the gentle patriarch.

The marriage scene effects the transfer of promise for the matriarchs. This is prepared for in the text by the birth notice of Rebekah, which occurs prior to the death notice of Sarah (22:22-23). As scholars have noted, the birth of the second-generation matriarch occurs before the death of the first, so that there will be no break in continuity.[165] By effecting the transfer of Isaac's affection from his mother to his wife, the transfer of the generations is completed. From the field, a masculine symbol of fertility,[166] Isaac moves into the tent of his mother, evoking images of "intimacy, fertility and covenantal continuity through women."[167] Sailhamer suggests, "This is the way the writer shows that Rebekah had taken the place of Sarah in the line of the seed of

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[165] For example, see Steinberg, 83. Sternberg suggests that this genealogical note further suggests that Rebekah is truly "the God-appointed bride." *Poetics*, 133.

[166] Insofar as men are described as tillers of soil and planters of seed. For a discussion on the image and its implications, see Carol Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of the Biblical Myth* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998), 29-34.

[167] Don Seeman, "Where Is Sarah Your Wife?': Cultural Poetics of Gender and Nationhood in the Hebrew Bible," *HTR* 91 (1998), 103-25, quote from 117.

Abraham."[168] Sarna agrees: "By this act, Rebekah formally becomes the successor to Sarah the matriarch."[169]

Because of the strength of her character, and enhanced by comparisons to Abraham, scholars have argued that Rebekah is also the successor to Abraham. Fewell and Gunn summarize it this way: "It is she, not Isaac, who follows in Abraham's footsteps, leaving the familiar for the unknown. It is she, not Isaac, who receives the blessing given to Abraham (22:17)."[170] Turner is blunt: "Abraham, Rebekah, and Jacob are the ancestors of this promise."[171] Likewise, Teugels suggests that the second generation is "more a matriarchal than a patriarchal cycle."[172] While there are clear similarities between Rebekah and Sarah, it is true that Rebekah takes a role most often associated with the patriarch. Both women are barren. However, unlike Sarah before her or Rachel after her, Rebekah does not take matters into her own hands (16:2), nor does she plead with men or with God to open her womb (30:1). Instead, Isaac takes on that role (25:21). Conversely, whereas Abraham received the word from the Lord that his yet-to-be-born younger son would be the heir to the promise rather than his first-born (17:15-21), Rebekah is the one to receive such information in the second generation. Struggling with her pregnancy, she inquires of the Lord and receives an answer explaining that her yet-to-be-born younger son will rule over her first-born (25:22-23).

Armed with the knowledge received in the oracle from the Lord, Rebekah orchestrates the passing on of the blessing to Jacob. While not able to actually pass on the blessing herself, she comes as close as possible to doing just that. She hatches a

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[168] Sailhamer, 183.
[169] Sarna, 170.
[170] Fewell and Gunn, Gender, 73.
[171] Turner, 44.
[172] Teugels, 64. Lieve Teugels, "A Matriarchal Cycle? The Portrayal of Isaac in Genesis in the Light of the Presentation of Rebekah," *BFTF* 56 (1995), 61-72. See also Teugals, "Strong," 97.

complicated plan to deceive Isaac, and then assumes full responsibility for any possible consequences (27:13). Her active role in securing a blessing for this son has been interpreted in a variety of ways ranging from that of merciless schemer to the only character strong enough to be entrusted with such an important task by the Lord.[173] Fewell and Gunn note the unique position of this patriarch: "Isaac as family patriarch may have *authority*, the right to make decisions and to command obedience, but Rebekah, nevertheless, does have *power*, the capacity to effect change."[174] Fuchs disagrees. She maintains that although Isaac is old and ailing, he is still superior to Rebekah in power, as exemplified by the necessity for her to deceive him.[175] As Sarna points out, the message of the oracle makes the election of Jacob a decision of God and not dependant on the scheming patriarch's behaviour. Nor, I would add, on Rebekah's. The oracle "tacitly asserts that his claim to be heir to the divine promises rests solely upon God's predetermination. Thus, his election is thereby disengaged from the improper means he later employed to obtain his rights."[176] Fewell and Gunn conclude that "she acts with God's sanction."[177] According to the text, Rebekah is made aware of the plan, and through her planning, it is effected. In the words of Benjamin Goodnick, Rebekah "did not see her action as one of deception but rather fulfilment."[178]

Having secured a blessing for her son, Rebekah engages in one final "patriarchal" act: she arranges for the marriage of the son of the promise. Like Abraham before her, Rebekah's final words are directed to secure her son a proper wife from the

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Turner, 43, Gillmayr-Bucher, 99, describes the blessing as being carried to the next generation by Rebekah.

[173] For a positive interpretation, see Turner, 47. Jeansonne, 67, says that she "skillfully completes the task initiated by God."

[174] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, 73.

[175] Fuchs, "Who is Hiding?" 137.

[176] Sarna, 179.

[177] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, 76.

right family line. Fittingly, Rebekah does not undertake the task herself, but entrusts it to Isaac (27:46-28:1). Ironically, whereas Abraham insisted that Isaac *not* go to the land of his ancestors out of fear for either the son or the promise, Rebekah sends Jacob to the same place in order to protect him (27:42-45). As in the case of Isaac, the marriage of the son will be the occasion for the transition between generations. However, the reversals continue. Whereas the blessing had been passed on to Rebekah in the first case, and then later given to Isaac, the blessing here is transferred from Isaac directly onto Jacob (28:3-4).

In the second generation of the promise narratives, the stories contain more than merely whispers and echoes of previous stories. They tell and retell, speaking in unison at some points, and sharply breaking with the intertexts at other points. Throughout, literary links draw Rebekah and the reader into the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs, often interchanging speaking parts among the characters. The effect is ultimately to break down the distinctions between the roles played by characters (matriarch vs. patriarch, for example) and to place the ultimate success or failure of all the plans in the hands of the Lord. This freedom allows the matriarch to take the center stage until her role as mother of the promise has been fulfilled.

Rebekah's Death and Burial

Rebekah's death is not recorded in the text. Like Abraham, her narrative voice is silenced after a suitable mate has been arranged for the child of the promise. The next and final mention of her in the Hebrew Bible takes place when the third generation patriarch is nearing the end of his life (49:31). Jacob asks to be buried in the cave of

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[178] Goodnick, 225. Benjamin Goodnick, "Rebekah's Deceit or Isaac's Great Test," *JBQ* 23 (1995), 221-8.

Machpelah, where "they buried Abraham and his wife Sarah," and where "they buried Isaac and his wife Rebekah" (49:31).

The fact that Rebekah's death is not recorded has been understood by some as a sign of divine disfavour for her deceit of her husband. Rendsburg suggests Rebekah is, in fact, cursed for usurping Esau's blessing, in that she assumed the curse on behalf of her son (27:13).[179] Hamilton points to the fact that she disappears without seeing her favoured son as her punishment for her involvement in the scheme.[180] However, other scholars, such as Teugels, suggest that she is strong and courageous enough to mitigate the divine promise for which she is clearly not punished.[181] This position seems to be attested to by the text. The oracle is given to Rebekah, and she acts as the catalyst for the promise. The text elsewhere attests to the fact that "human action" can be used on behalf of securing God's promises and plans just as easily as it can be thwarted when it contravenes the divine plan.[182]

The reason Rebekah's death is not recorded may best be described as a lack of necessity. There is a significant difference in the death of matriarchs and patriarchs, in that deathbed legacies are the occasions of the transfer of blessing from one generation to the next for the patriarchs. The same is not true for the matriarchs. While Sarah's death is painstakingly recorded, as we have seen, it functions to make tangible and legitimate the promise of land to the matriarchs as well as the patriarchs. The blessing,

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[179] Gary A. Rendsburg, "Notes on Genesis 35," *VT* 34 (1984), 361-6; 364. For a discussion of late 19th and early 20th century commentators on the nature of Rebekah, see Turner, 48-9.
[180] Hamilton, 378.
[181] Teugels calls her an "intermediary" of the promise; she acts on the information she receives from God and is clearly not cursed, "Matriarchal," 67-68.
[182] Abraham, as we have seen, is not to take matters into his own hands to secure a son for himself; however, he is "allowed" to purchase the cave and symbolically secure a piece of the promise. In later narratives, Joseph informs his brothers that, while their actions were motivated by evil desires, God had intended their actions for good (45:5-8).

not passed on to a chosen offspring but to a chosen and divinely sanctioned wife, is transferred in other ways in the matriarchal line.

It is significant that Rebekah's birth is mentioned, while her death is not. The text, as described above, uses the occasion of her birth to announce a legitimate successor rather than Sarah's death scene. Nowhere, except in the transposition of birth and death in the narrative, are the two matriarchs linked. Likewise, Rebekah does not personally pass on a blessing to the third-generation matriarchs; she is, however, linked in the narrative in that she arranges for Jacob to be sent to his future wives. For the second time in the narrative, the arrangements for the succeeding generation are in place before the demise of the preceding one.

What is important for the text to record, however, is that Rebekah is buried in the Cave of Machpelah as the legitimate wife of the second-generation patriarch, and as the one chosen by the Lord to be the matriarch of the promise.

The Excluded Women: Judith, Basemath, Mahalath and Deborah

There are no "other women" in the Rebekah narratives. The only women who share the narratives with Rebekah, aside from her mother, are the Hittite wives of Esau. According to the text, Judith and Basemath "brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah" (26:34-35). As a result, Rebekah is weary of her life and adamant that Jacob will marry from her family line. Her last recorded speech is to that effect: *Rebekah said to Isaac, "I am tired of living because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of Heth, like these, from the daughters of the land, what good will my life be to me?"* (27:46). It is worth noting that Esau, seeing that Jacob was instructed not to take a Canaanite wife, attempts to placate his father by marrying a woman who is not of Hittite descent. His concern is, not surprisingly, to obtain his *father's* approval rather than his *mother's*. Esau marries Mahalath, one of the offspring of Ishmael (28:6-9). Again the

narrative draws back into the story the seemingly excluded line of the first generation. No reaction is recorded for this matrimonial move. It could be imagined that, while Rebekah may have preferred a wife from her father's household, the non-chosen oldest brother might be more receptive to a wife from the non-chosen oldest son of Abraham.

The only other woman connected to this powerful matriarch is the nurse who accompanies her from her father's household (24:59). She is not mentioned by name at this point in the narrative, although much later in the text a death notice for "Deborah, Rebekah's nurse" who is buried under the "oak of weeping" near Bethel (35:8). Occurring well into the Jacob cycle, this notice is routinely dismissed by scholars as being displaced.[183]

Two questions arise from this death and burial notice: why is the death of such a minor character recorded, and why does it appear in the text at such a late point in the story? In answer to these questions, several theories have been suggested. Sarna and von Rad attribute a practical reason for the inclusion of Deborah's death notice: i.e. that there were traditions around the burial of Deborah which had to be accounted for.[184] Its record in the text at this point, then, is justified by the proximity of the story to the location of the burial place traditionally associated with Deborah.

Hamilton, on the other hand, suggests an ideological reason: that Deborah's death notice, evoking as it does the name of Rebekah, is a grim reminder that the matriarch died without seeing her son again. According to Hamilton, it recalls the curse of Rebekah for her deception of Isaac.[185] Its location in the text pairs the birth of two people, Esau and Jacob, with the death of two people, Deborah and Rachel, as a

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[183] See, for example, Speiser, 270.
[184] Sarna, 241. This location is associated, by some scholars, with the palm of Deborah in the book of Judges (Judg 4:5). See Westermann, 552.
[185] Hamilton, 378.

structure in the narrative unit of the Jacob cycle.[186] Terry Prewitt likewise accounts for its inclusion from a structural point of view which fits the Jacob/Joseph stories into a parallel structure to the Abrahamic cycle. According to his structure, Deborah's death parallels that of the ram in the story of Isaac's sacrifice.[187]

Thomas Brodie structurally equates the death of Deborah with that of Rachel rather than with Rebekah. As such, the parallel death notices show "the ambiguity of death. Death is not altogether negative." He suggests that while Deborah's death is associated with the burial of the false gods and is an occasion for weeping, Rachel's death occasions a monument like the one raised to commemorate the covenant. Rather than "more lugubrious, as one might have expected," Rachel's death is portrayed in a much more positive light. It is associated with the covenant renewal at Bethel where Jacob likewise raised a monument, and therefore carries a promise. "Thus, Rachel's monument, toward Bethlehem, is not an isolated place. It is in the shadow of the covenant monument at Bethel."[188]

Like Brodie, Sarna equates Deborah's death and burial with the expulsion of foreign gods. Her death is symbolic of the severance of all Mesopotamian ties, of which Deborah was a "living symbol."[189]

Other scholars suggest that the inclusion of the death notice of Deborah is an indication of her special status.[190] As Pardes notes, the importance of a wet nurse made her a highly valued member of a household.[191] Maintaining a nurse may have been a

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[186] Hamilton, 379.
[187] Terry J. Prewitt, *The Elusive Covenant: A Structural-Semiotic Reading of Genesis* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 17.
[188] Brodie, 337.
[189] Sarna, 241; von Rad 338.
[190] Teubal suggests that "Deborah was buried under a sacred tree, an indication of her distinctive status." 85-86.
[191] Pardes, *Biography*, 43.

sign of wealth, and close bonds may have formed between her and the family to which she was attached.

Deborah's role in the lives of the matriarchs and patriarchs may have been more symbolic, however, than sentimental. Having been a sustaining presence in Rebekah's infancy, she moves with the matriarch to a "new" land, the land of promise. Deborah is mentioned only in conjunction with the journey. She then disappears from the texts until another journey back into the land associated with promise. This time the one making the journey is Jacob.

When Jacob first flees from the land and from the wrath of his brother, the Lord appears to him at Bethel and promises Jacob that he will someday return to the land (28:10-17). The Lord also promises to be with the patriarch throughout his journey. After he has spent many years in Haran, Jacob is "called" to leave that country and go to the land of his birth (31:3; 35:1). When he returns to the place where he first received the promise from God, his return journey is complete. He is ready to assume his place as patriarch in the promised land. Upon his return, Deborah dies.

As Pardes points out, as the children of Israel make their wilderness journey to this "land flowing with milk and honey," they will be characterized as a "vulnerable suckling who needs to be nursed and carried in the bosom in order to survive."[192] Unlike the children of Israel, the matriarchs and patriarchs were accompanied by a symbol of wealth and sustenance.

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[192] Pardes, "Biography," 43.

VI. The First Wife of the Third Generation: Leah

Leah is the oldest of two daughters of Laban, the brother of Rebekah. She enters the narrative as the counterpoint to her beautiful and beloved sister Rachel. When Jacob completes his seven years of service to Laban in exchange for Rachel, Laban switches brides on Jacob's wedding night. Jacob agrees to complete the required seven nights with Leah, and then to take Rachel as his second wife in exchange for seven more years of service.

Seeing that she is unloved, the Lord opens her womb and she gives birth to Jacob's first son. In a maternal contest with her sister for favour and status, Leah gives birth to six sons and a daughter: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun and Dinah. Through her maid, Zilpah, she is also "credited" with the births of Gad and Asher. Aside from her marriage and the births of her children, there is little information given about Leah. In a rare anecdote, she sells the mandrakes found by her son Reuben to her sister Rachel in exchange for an extra night with their husband.

While Rachel's death and burial on the way to Ephrath is recorded, Leah's death is not recorded in the text. She is buried by her husband in the cave of Machpelah with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah. This information is recorded indirectly in the deathbed speech of Jacob.

Literary Links to the Promise

Of all the matriarchs, Leah is the most overlooked. Despite this propensity to overlook her, the texts still provide her story with numerous literary links to the larger narrative. As with the story of Rebekah, Leah's story opens with a betrothal at the well. However, she is not the subject of the scene. In this version of the type-scene, as expected, a *"hero" travels to another land*. In this case, Jacob goes to the home of his mother's brother to find a wife. He meets a *virgin at a well*. She is not only properly

connected, but she also comes with sheep (29:10)! Jacob *performs a heroic feat* by rolling away the stone and watering the flocks of Rachel (29:10). He then kisses and weeps over his beloved and *goes to her father's house* (29:11-13). After a month, the subject of a *betrothal* is broached when Laban offers Jacob wages for his work (29:15). Only at this point in the narrative is Leah introduced:

> *(16) Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel.* (29:16)

The betrothal of Jacob and Rachel is arranged with Laban in exchange for seven year's labour. So far the type-scene has followed a fairly predictable pattern. However, in the final element of the type-scene, the *marriage*, a great variance occurs:

> *(23) Now in the evening he took his daughter Leah, and brought her to him; and Jacob went in to her. (25) So it came about in the morning that, behold, it was Leah!* (29:23, 25)

By this act, Leah becomes the legitimate first-wife of the patriarch, despite the trickery involved in the marriage scene, even as Jacob became legitimately blessed despite the deception involved in his procurement of the blessing.

The bed trick associated with Leah and Rachel is a variation on a common motif or type-scene of sibling rivalry and reversal of blessing. Set in a society in which the laws of primogeniture were to be determinative, Genesis records with astounding frequency a number of instances in which the opposite is true. From the first set of siblings, the primacy of the younger over the older is regularly asserted. The Lord prefers the offering of the younger son, Abel, over that of the older son, Cain (4:3-5). In the promise narratives, Isaac, the younger son, inherits the blessing of Abraham rather than his older brother Ishmael. In the most closely-related incident to this story, Jacob usurps the birthright and blessing of his twin brother Esau. Among the offspring of Leah,

Judah, the youngest of the first "batch" of children born to Jacob, will inherit in the place of the first-born, Reuben (49:3-10). Later, Ephraim will be singled out for the primary blessing over his older brother Manassah (48:13-19).

In the cases preceding Leah, the siblings are so different and yet so intimately connected as to appear as shadow selves of one another. Cain is a farmer and Abel a shepherd. Whereas the name "Cain" is associated with the smith and with forging bronze and iron, the name "Abel" is associated with vanity, futility or breath. Abel is a whisper of his brother; he passes out of the story with only the cry of his blood left behind (4:10). In the case of Isaac and Ishmael, the difference between them may be more constructed than inherent. It is by Sarah's insistence that the two are not to be connected. After the feast to celebrate the weaning of יִצְחָק, Sarah responds with outrage to see Ishmael מְצַחֵק. Some scholars have suggested that Ishmael was "Isaac-ing" or being too much like Isaac.[193] This translation would suggest that Sarah is adamantly disassociating her son from the son of the foreign slave: so much so that she sends him away. Jacob and Esau are twins: opposites who comprise two halves of a whole. Esau is the man of the fields, whereas Jacob dwells in tents. Esau is driven by basic instincts, whereas Jacob is a sophisticated manipulator.

In the case of Leah and Rachel, the pattern is once again established. They are two siblings who could be seen as shadow sides of one another.[194] Right from the

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[193] For a summary of various positions, see Hamilton, 78-79. Westermann suggests that it is a purely practical consideration at seeing the boys together at play which caused Sarah's reaction, 339. Von Rad suggests that it is the equality of the boys which threatens Sarah, 232. Alter suggests the translation of either "mocking" or "Isaac-ing-it" in an attempt to take over the role of Isaac, 98.

[194] Cohen speaks of the sisters as "shadows" of one another with confusing distinctions and many similarities, 333, 340. Norman J. Cohen, "Two That are One: Sibling Rivalry in Genesis," *Judaism* 32 (1983), 331-42.

beginning, Leah's introduction connects her closely to her sister as she is described in relation to her:

> *(16) Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. (17) And Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and face.* (29:16-17)

One is beautiful and loved (v. 18), the other less attractive but hated. The younger one is preferred over the older. The stage is set for another familiar reversal of blessing type-scene, but it is foiled when the reversal is reversed. After seven years of work for the younger daughter, the older assumes her "rightful" place as the first given in marriage. Laban explains his deception of Jacob this way: *"It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the firstborn"* (29:26). While it is the practice outside the main story line of the promise for the oldest to inherit,[195] the opposite is more often the case in the promise narrative. It is difficult not to read this comment without the suggestion of reproach in Laban's statement, considering the fact that Jacob had, in fact, gained his inheritance at the expense of his older brother.[196] Fokkelmann remarks that Jacob is being taught a lesson: "now it is your turn to be the victim of deceit, cunning heel-catcher!"[197]

The contrast and connection between the siblings continues unabated throughout their marriage to the same man. Leah is fertile; Rachel is barren. Rachel struggles with her sister, even as Jacob struggles with a divine being (30:8).[198]

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[195] In the case of women, who "inherited" when they were given a dowry at the time of marriage, this was the occasion for receiving their inheritance.

[196] See, for example, Rendsburg, 364.

[197] J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975), 128.

[198] In fact, Fokkelman, 153, equates Rachel's struggles with her sister so closely with those of Jacob that he calls her "Jacoba." Pardes likewise equates the two, but suggests that the inequality between this pair is still apparent. Whereas Jacob's story forms the plot, Rachel's forms merely the subplot. What works for Jacob (stealing birthright and blessing, usurping the

According to Brenner, they are "one split image," yet they "enjoy no intimacy but, instead, quarrel and bicker incessantly."[199] The contest to produce male offspring and to garner the favour of Jacob is almost comical in extreme. One is drawn to sympathy for Leah's constant refrain that "*now this time my husband will become attached to me...*" (29:34) or "*now my husband will dwell with me...*" (30:20). Rachel, for her part, is consumed with jealousy and longs to have the Lord remove her reproach (30:1, 6, 23). Leah's lack of love and regard from her husband is not vindicated by her fertility any more than the love of her husband makes up for Rachel's lack of regard and blessing from God. Both desire what the other has in abundance.

In their longing, they are willing to forfeit their blessing in exchange for the blessing of the other, as is illustrated in the anecdote concerning the mandrakes. Leah will sacrifice her fertility, symbolized by the mandrakes,[200] for the embrace of Jacob; Rachel will forgo the loving embrace of her husband in exchange for fertility. Samuel Dresner describes theirs as a "contest between *love* and *motherhood*."[201] Mieke Bal describes the split between the two women (1 + 1 = 1) as a well-known separation that occurs "between love and fertility...between sexuality and maternity." Through a rare instance of female cooperation, they give up what is theirs to obtain what they lack. This exchange, negotiated in such a way as to complete the women and escape patriarchal restraints, is "thoroughly subversive."[202] Pardes suggests that by working together to turn the tables on the patriarch and momentarily ascribing to him the position of "other,"

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position of his sibling) does not, in fact, work for Rachel. Pardes, *Countertraditions,* 60-78, especially 62.

[199] Brenner, 263.

[200] Mandrakes roots were said to resemble a man's genitals. They were associated with fertility and were considered an aphrodisiac in the ancient world. See von Rad, 295, and Spires, 231.

[201] Samuel H. Dresner, *Rachel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 53.

[202] Bal, *Lethal Love,* 84.

Leah and Rachel have "learned to cooperate in times of distress."[203] Brenner disagrees, suggesting that the pairing of mothers does not result in cooperation, but rather conflict set in a stereotypical portrayal of women as competitive and deceitful.

> ...the basic motifs—two women whose prime motivation is motherhood, who do not get along together, whose behaviour is ultimately destructive and causes family friction and damage to themselves through continuing competition between their children—remain the same.[204]

Ironically, Rachel's plan backfires and Leah becomes fertile again after a time of barrenness (29:35).[205] This is not surprising, since fertility requires the embrace of a partner, and each of the women "possess" only one part of this formula.

Throughout this story there are echoes of the story of the "stolen" birthright. Just as Esau had been out in the field and was "famished," so Rachel's barrenness has brought her to desperation. She pleads with Jacob saying, "Give me children, or else I die!" (30:1) even as Esau pleads with Jacob, "Behold, I am about to die; so of what *use* then is the birthright to me?" (25:32). As Jacob exchanges a swallow of for Esau's birthright, so Leah exchanges the mandrakes of the field for the right to give birth to another of Jacob's children (30:18).

The language used by Leah is that of a business deal, not unlike the one negotiated between Laban and Jacob. Whereas Jacob is paid his "wages" for 14 years of work with two wives, so Leah "hires" her husband with her son's mandrakes. It is

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[203] Ilana Pardes, "Rachel's Dream of Grandeur," *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Christina Buchmann and Celina Spiegel (New York: Fawcett, 1994), 27-40. Pardes, "Grandeur," 32-3.

[204] Brenner, 262.

[205] Exum suggests that the fertility potion may have ultimately worked or that, in any event, Rebekah becomes pregnant only after having taken the initiative, 79. This is a remarkable claim, considering the lengths that the text goes to in order to demonstrate that human initiative cannot replace divine decisions. While it is true that Sarah is made fertile after her active attempt to

remarkable that Leah does not describe the ensuing child of this union as the result of this exchange, but rather as her "wages" for having given her *shifhah* to Jacob. These enigmatic phrases continually recall the struggle and the deception that has characterized the relationships among Leah, her sister, and her husband.

The active role of the Lord in the promise narratives continues in this generation as in the previous ones. Like her predecessors, Leah was not the woman chosen by the patriarch. Rebekah had been chosen by the Lord through an unnamed servant, rather than by the second-generation patriarch. Abraham had been willing to adopt a son or have one born to another woman, but the Lord was adamant that Sarah be the mother of the promise.[206]

The Lord's choosing of Leah is further confirmed in the immediate fertility bestowed upon Leah by the Lord. Despite the fact that all of the sons of the sisters and their maids receive blessings and become the foundation of the twelve tribes of Israel, it is Leah's son Judah to whom the primary blessing is given and to whose descendants the eternal reign of David is later announced. Sailhamer remarks that while Rachel was chosen over Leah by Jacob, the Lord clearly has other plans. "By [having Rachel barren], the writer shows again that Jacob's plans have come to naught. Jacob had planned to take Rachel as his wife, but God intended him to have Leah."[207] Leah may be overshadowed by Rachel and overlooked by Jacob, but she is regarded by God.

Strikingly, this overlooked character is connected to sight, even as were a number of the preceding characters. As already noted, eyes and seeing play a very important role in the story of Hagar and Ishmael in the Abraham-Sarah stories. Sight is

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procure a child, as in the case of Rachel, these stories merely highlight the impossibility of procuring a child in this manner.

[206] Ironically, Sarah was also willing to forgo her role as biological mother in the promise narratives.

granted to Hagar in compensation for the harsh treatment and lack of regard which she suffers. In the stories of Isaac and Rebekah, it is the overshadowed Isaac who finds himself at the "well of the living one who sees" (24:62). The more delicate and frail of this duo is duped because of his failing eyesight by the stronger and more assertive Rebekah. Unlike Rachel, who catches the eye of the third-generation patriarch, Leah is invisible to Jacob, even as he takes her as his wife. She is veiled behind the false identity of her sister until the morning awakens him to her. Ironically, Leah's eyes are her most notable characteristic, being referred to as רַכּוֹת ("tender" or "weak").[208]

Scholarship has been divided on the precise translations of the description. Von Rad and Sarna describe Leah's eyes as "lacking in lustre."[209] In contrast, Speiser describes them as lovely.[210] Alter implies that Leah's eyes may have been her only lovely feature, in contrast to her utterly attractive sister.[211] Hamilton suggests that the term be properly understood instead as "gentle...soft...delicate...and young." Despite being older, he claims, Leah's are "the beautiful eyes of a person who looks much younger."[212] Regardless of the possible interpretations of the adjective, the mere fact that Leah is described in terms of her eyes is significant. It is a further point of association and difference between the sisters: whereas her sister is described in terms of her *appearance*, Leah is described in terms of her *eyes*.

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[207] Sailhamer, 195.
[208] According to Midrash, Leah's eyes were weak from excessive crying over the thought that she, as the oldest daughter, would be forced to marry Esau, the oldest son of her father's sister. See Meier, 48. Levi Meier, "Jacob and His Four Wives," *Journal of Psychology and Judaism*, 16 (1992), 47-71. Also Dresner, 50.
[209] Von Rad, 291, and Sarna, 204.
[210] Spires, 225.
[211] Alter, 153. This would function in much the same way that the phrase "s/he has a good personality" may be used as an epithet for a personal lacking in physical attractiveness today.
[212] Hamilton, 258-9.

Leah's Death and Burial

Leah's death, like Rebekah's, is not recorded. Unlike Rebekah, whose lack of a death notice is credited by some to her deception of her husband, Leah's lack of death notice is not blamed on her (and her father's) deception of her husband. Instead, it is frequently perceived as being indicative of her lack of status in life.[213] This would be true if one were to consider only Jacob's regard for Leah. According to the Lord, Leah's status is that of the legitimate first-wife. She is the bearer of the son to whom, out of all the sons of Jacob, the primary blessing is given. Her son will have the sceptre and the staff of authority over his brothers. Since Leah has been granted fertility exceeding that of her sister, there is no basis for ascribing the omission of her death notice to a lack of status. Norman J. Cohen, in a study on sibling rivalry in Genesis, suggests that as the shadow "half" of Rachel, a death notice for Leah was not necessary or appropriate when one was already provided for her symbolic other self.[214] Even if one rejects this as the reason for the omission, as it would certainly not have applied in the case of the matriarch before her, there is simply no narrative need for a death notice.

What is necessary to impart in the text is the information that Leah is buried in the cave of Machpelah. Scholarly opinions are varied regarding the significance of her burial at this location. Samuel Dresner describes her as the ugly and unloved wife, rejected and "hidden away" in the Cave of Machpelah.[215] Others see her burial in the family cave as the ultimate vindication of the legitimate wife chosen by the Lord. Pardes specifically links Jacob's deathbed request with Leah's final victory over her sister:

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[213] Jeansonne, 85, suggests that it is not surprising that the overlooked matriarch is ignored in death.
[214] Cohen, 341.
[215] Dresner, 176.

> To be sure, Jacob will mourn Rachel for the rest of his life (see Gen. 48:7) and will love her sons, Benjamin and especially Joseph, more than Leah's sons. Yet when Jacob himself approaches death, he will ask to lie at Leah's side (Gen 49:31): he will end up preferring the traditional burial place, where Abraham buried Sarah and Isaac buried Rebekah, to being buried as an outsider, on the road, with Rachel. This is, no doubt, Leah's ultimate triumph.[216]

The information about her burial site reiterates her status as the legitimate first wife. Jacob refers to the three generations of ancestors in a very specific fashion: *"There they buried Abraham and his wife Sarah, there they buried Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and there I buried Leah* (49:31)." Her inclusion in the family tomb completes the list of the patriarchs and their first wives, chosen by the Lord and legitimate heirs of the promise.

The Excluded Women: Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah

The truly neglected of the women of the promise narratives are Zilpah and Bilhah, handmaidens of Leah and Rachel respectively.[217] They are the ones for whom no death notice is given and no burial place recorded. Yet within the text that are never completely absorbed into the identity of their mistresses. Their children, while credited to one sister or the other in the tally of offspring, remain the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah (35:23-36; 37:2; 46:18). The status of the sons within the family is affected by the relative status of their mothers. When in danger, the less-favoured wives/concubines and their children step first into danger (33:2). In the view of the patriarch, they are the

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[216] Pardes, 37.

[217] Elizabeth Wyner Mark, "The Four Wives of Jacob: Matriarchs Seen and Unseen," *Reconstructionist* 63:1 (1998), 22-35. Mark points out that even among feminist scholars who are claiming to bring voice to the marginalized women of the texts, Bilhah and Zilpah are generally overlooked. See Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster, 1994), 68. In Bellis' book, Bilhah and Zilpah get no more than a single passing reference to the use of slaves as surrogate mothers.

most expendable. When receiving a blessing, the sons are blessed according to their mothers and their birth order.[218] By retaining their identity, despite their personal lack of privileges and the anonymity of their gravesites, these matriarchs serve as a reminder of the expanding nature of the promise, in constant tension with the limitations imposed by proper marriage and family alliances. As in the previous cycles, the promise narratives continually reincorporate those previously or otherwise excluded.

Rachel, the matriarch most loved by Jacob, dies and is buried as the exiled matriarch.[219] Her death takes place on the road to Ephrath as she is giving birth to Benjamin (35:18-20). She is buried there, away from the family tomb. The reasons offered for this burial site are numerous. Classical Jewish commentators claim reasons ranging from the disrepair of the road leading back to Mamre to the overwhelming grief of Jacob which paralysed him.[220] Pardes suggests that Rachel's exclusion highlights Leah's role as the bearer of the primary (i.e. Davidic) line. According to Pardes, Rachel instead falls under the curse spoken by Jacob on the one who stole the *teraphim* of Laban (31:32).[221] This view is rejected by Hamilton, who denies that Rachel is being punished for her theft.[222] The function of the story of the theft of the household gods is highly debated. Some suggest that Rachel was attempting to secure an inheritance for her son, over and against the claims of the sons of Leah.[223] In a book equating sacrifice

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[218] In terms of birth order, the pattern is as follows: Leah has four sons, then Bilhah has two sons, Zilphah has two sons, Leah has two more sons, and finally Rachel has two sons. In terms of blessing, however, all six of the sons of Leah are blessed first, then the sons of Bilhah, Zilpah and Rachel, in that order. The only exception to the birth order within the blessings is that Zebulun is blessed before his older brother Issachar (49:1-28).

[219] Pardes describes Rachel's death as symbolic of "her unfulfilled yearnings, her tragic exile." Grandeur, 35.

[220] Dresner, 177-179.

[221] Pardes, 35. Pardes further claims that cursing Rachel may have been the intention of Jacob all along, despite his initial love for her 35-36.

[222] Hamilton, 385.

[223] See, for example, Ktziah Spanier, "Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim: Her Struggle for Family Primacy," *VT* 42 (1992), 404-12. Spanier,105.

with the claim of patrilineal descent, Nancy Jay claims that the struggle over the *teraphim* represents the corresponding struggle between matrilineal and patrilineal descent.[224] The story is perhaps best understood in relation to the story that will be related concerning Benjamin and the stolen silver cup used for divination (44:2-34). In the case of Rachel and her father, the household gods are truly stolen and concealed. In the case of Rachel's son and his brothers, the cup is concealed but not really stolen. The first incident leads to separation among members of a family, whereas the second leads to reconciliation. The theft of the *teraphim* marks the physical separation of the household of Jacob from the land out of which he and his forefather Abraham had been called. The alleged theft of the silver cup marks the physical separation of Jacob and his sons from the land of promise to Egypt.

To understand Rachel's theft of the *teraphim* in terms of separation and transition rather than simply power and punishment is far more in keeping with the death and burial of the matriarch. Her death takes place in a transition to life; the location of her death hovers between that of a childbed and a deathbed.

Although not buried in the family tomb, Rachel's gravesite becomes important in another set of promises, narratives and traditions beyond Genesis. In the Hebrew Bible, Rachel becomes the mourning mother lamenting over her lost children (Jer 31:15). In tradition, she continues to outshine Leah. Perhaps the most compelling explanation for her gravesite according to Jewish tradition was that it would serve as a symbol of hope for exiled Israel. According to this explanation, Rachel was placed in the path of the children of Israel as they were carried into exile, so that she could rise and walk with

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[224] Jay,102-8. Jay further points to the deliberate use of menstrual blood as a pollutant, nowhere else attested in the bible, as a shocking means to attempt to control the line of descent. This action will result in the death curse, 107-8.

them. Her presence would give them hope for a return to the land.[225] For the later Christian church, the birthplace of Rachel on the way to Bethlehem pointed toward the messianic fulfilment claimed for the offspring of the line of David. In both cases, the final resting place of Rachel became connected with other narratives of promise. Even as Hagar, the excluded mother, inherits her own set of promises and blessings, so also Rachel, the exiled mother, is part of her own narrative of promise.

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[225] See Dresner, 179-184. This symbolic function may be reflected in the name given to Benjamin. While Rachel calls her child בֶּן־אוֹנִי or son of my sorrow, Jacob renames him בִּנְיָמִין or son of the right hand. The son named for the sorrow felt by the matriarch is renamed to express hope. This is appropriate for a person and a place symbolic of exile and return.

VII. The Patriarchs and the Cave of Machpelah

The cave of Machpelah was as important to the patriarchs as to the matriarchs of the promise narratives. In death, each of the patriarchs moves back to Machpelah. When Abraham dies,

> *His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, (10) the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah.* (25:9-10)

Isaac was near the family burial place when he died "at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is Hebron)" (35:27) and was buried there by his sons. Most notably, Jacob – the patriarch whose journey took him far from the land of Canaan into Egypt – used his final words to carry him back to the cave:

> *(29) Then he charged them, saying to them, "I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my ancestors – in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, (30) in the cave in the field at Machpelah, near Mamre, in the land of Canaan, in the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site. (31) There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah – (32) the field and the cave that is in it were purchased from the Hittites."* (49:29-32)

The necessity for Jacob to be carried back to the burial place of the patriarchs and matriarchs draws the children of Israel back to the land once again before their time of slavery and wandering in the wilderness will begin. The cave serves as a reminder of the promise which still looms far in the future. Sailhamer draws attention to how Jacob's deathbed request functions in the narrative:

> He wanted to be buried in the land with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah, the central figures of the preceding narratives. The point of the request within the present narrative is the renewal of the reader's awareness of the promise of the land.[226]

As Brodie notes, the words of the narrative become a refrain which serves as a reminder of the promise given to Abraham and Sarah. "The recounting of the location, 'the land of Canaan...in the cave of the field of Machpelah...facing Mamre," has by now become a kind of soulful chant. And the closing word, 'Mamre,' recalls the presence of a God who, at Mamre, surpassed human calculations" (18:1-5).[227]

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[226] Sailhamer, 238.
[227] Brodie, 416.

VIII. The Promise to the Matriarchs: Conclusion

Sarah, Rebekah and Leah, in their life, hold a unique status as the first wives, and primary matriarchs, of the promise narratives. In their death, they become the first women to symbolically enter the land of promise.

The "other" women of the promise narratives – Hagar, Ketura, Judith, Basemath, Mahalath, Deborah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah—do not bear the primary children of the promise, but they bear other children. They do not receive the same promise, but they receive other promises. Their death and burial, while sometimes noted for other reasons within the text, does not bring them back to the cave of Machpelah. These women are not written out of the texts, however. Their presence in the stories continually reintegrates the "other" lines of descent back into the promise narratives, forming the tension that holds the texts somewhere between exclusivity and inclusion.

The literary links which connect the primary matriarchs to the promise narratives stretch out across the generations. These women are linked in creative and transformative acts, such as naming and renaming. They experience barrenness giving way to fertility. They create their own versions of typical stories. They are bold to speak to God or to bargain for sexual power. They do not hesitate to deceive and manipulate, at times for their own purposes and, but also to mitigate blessings for others and to ensure the continuance of the promise. They wrestle with their shadow selves and long for the things which they lack.

To each of the matriarchs, in turn is given the three parts of the promise: land, offspring and blessing. In each generation of the promise narratives, one woman is designated by the Lord to be the matriarch of the promise. She is, in each case, the first wife of the patriarch, although in two out of three cases, she is chosen to be his wife without his knowledge. Each of these women, through pregnancies associated with

struggles or difficulties, gives birth to an offspring to whom is passed on the primary family blessing. The matriarchs receive and pass on blessings and promises. Ultimately, in their death, these women are laid to rest at Machpelah, as full participants in the promise narratives. In death, they are placed into the cave within the field--the place of death within the womb of life—both as a deposit on the promise yet to be realized in their offspring, and in fulfilment of the promises made also to them.

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